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Pope Leo XIV poses with Montse Alvarado, president and chief operating officer of EWTN News

Pope Leo XIV poses with Montse Alvarado, president and chief operating officer of EWTN News, during a private meeting at the Vatican Sept. 5, 2025. Alvarado takes over as prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication in November. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Catholic Press)



by Michael Sean Winters

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If you write about the Catholic Church, one of the first things you do every morning is check out the Vatican's daily "Bollettino" which announces any resignations or appointments, as well as any audiences the pope held that day. Any new documents are posted there too. I check it on my phone before I get out of bed and you have to check it in Italian because sometimes there is a new document published but it is not yet available in English!

[Monday's bulletin](#) announced the pope had given four *udienze* to senior Vatican officials and the first two mentioned were women: La Dottoressa Maria Montserrat Alvarado, Prefetto del Dicastero per la Comunicazione; La Reverenda Suora Nathalie Becquart, Sotto-Segretario della Segreteria Generale del Sinodo. The other two

udienze listed were to an Australian archbishop and an Italian cardinal.

This simple page on the Vatican website struck me like a brick, all the more because there was no fanfare. It was the normalcy of the announcements that startled me. Make no mistake. There is a revolution that has been occurring in the past few years as first Pope Francis and now Pope Leo XIV are appointing women to positions of authority and responsibility in the highest ranks of the Roman curia. It is the new normal.

The first woman appointed to lead a Vatican dicastery was [Sr. Simona Brambilla](#) of the Consolata Missionaries. On Jan. 6, 2025, Francis [named her as prefect](#) of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Two years prior, Brambilla was the first woman named as secretary of that Vatican dicastery. Her office oversees the more than 700,000 religious men and women throughout the world.

The next month, Francis named [Sr. Rafaella Petrini](#) of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist as president of the Vatican City State. Petrini is Italian but the order is based in Meriden, Connecticut. Previously, while serving as secretary general of the Vatican City State, in 2022, Petrini was named to the powerful Dicastery for Bishops, the first time a woman became a member of the office which vets bishops to be appointed throughout the world.

This year, Leo named [Salesian Sr. Alessandra Smerilli](#) as prefect of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development. She had served as secretary to that dicastery under Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny since 2022. Italian Cardinal Fabio Baggio was named pro-prefect, but Smerilli is the one in charge of what is one of the busiest Vatican offices.

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Which brings us to Monday's audiences. The first person mentioned, Montse Alvarado, is the incoming prefect of the Dicastery of Communications, the dicastery in the Vatican with the most employees. [Her appointment](#) was announced in June but she won't take charge of the communications shop until November. Unlike the others, she is not a religious sister but a laywoman.

The second audience was given to Becquart, who continues to serve as undersecretary general of the Synod of Bishops, a post she has held since 2021. She played an instrumental role in the two synods on synodality and travels the world encouraging local churches to embrace a more synodal style of governance and witness. She may be the most well known of the women who work at the Vatican. Her only competition? [Professor Emilce Cuda](#), who is secretary at the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. She also is on the road a great deal, visiting local churches and attending academic conferences that keep the Holy See informed about what is going on in the world.

These appointments of women as prefects were made possible by the promulgation of a [new constitution](#) for the Roman curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, by Pope Francis in 2022. That document opened the door to appointing non-clerics to senior Vatican posts. It broke up the "all boys club" atmosphere which, once broken, can never be resurrected.

For the first time in its history, the Roman curia now has some diversity of sex, of race, of nationality, of viewpoint, none of which existed in the Vatican 100 years ago. The Roman Curia for centuries has been all male, all white, all Italian and all clerical. Not anymore and not ever again. And it is curious that the changes really started at the top with the internationalization of the College of Cardinals in the mid-20th century and the election of four non-Italian popes starting in October 1978.

Interestingly, I once was having coffee with friends in Rome and someone asked a religious sister who worked at the Vatican what it was like being a woman in such an overwhelmingly male organization. The sister replied that being a woman was not the problem. Being a non-Italian required years to master the bureaucracy!

None of the recent appointments of women raised any doctrinal issue: Removing the requirement of priestly ordination for senior positions begins the end of the clericalism that has dominated the Curia as well. The priesthood may remain reserved to men, but decision-making in the church is no longer reserved to clerics. The voices of women are now heard in the highest counsels of the Vatican. It is now routine. There is no going back.

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