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Pope plays musical chairs with Vatican jobs

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NCR Today

Vatican City — In what amounts to a game of musical chairs in the Vatican, Pope Francis today confirmed several officials in their jobs and moved others around — a sign, perhaps, that the new pontiff is putting together his own team.

Among other key moves, American Archbishop Augustine Di Noia was named an “adjunct secretary” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, returning him to the doctrinal office where the Bronx native previously served as under-secretary from 2002 to 2009.

Italian Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, previously the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, was named the “Major Penitentiary,” or head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, a Vatican court that deals with matters of the internal forum, including forgiveness of sins, excommunications and indulgences.

Francis named Archbishop Beniamino Stella to take over at the Congregation for Clergy. The 72-year old Stella is currently the head of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the Vatican’s elite school for diplomats.

In other moves:

- Francis confirmed Italian Cardinal Fernando Filoni as prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the Vatican’s missionary congregation, and its other senior officials.
- He likewise confirmed German Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, along with his top deputies.
- The pope sent Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, previously the secretary of the Synod to Bishops, as his new ambassador to Germany. He tapped Italian Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, formerly the secretary of the Congregation for Bishops, as the new head of the synod.

In terms of Roman reaction, the reassignment of Piacenza raised the most eyebrows.

In Vatican politics, a move from a congregation to the penitentiary is generally viewed as a step down, given that the work of the penitentiary unfolds mostly behind the scenes and doesn't have the same impact on broader church policy.

A native of Genoa and a protégé of the legendary Cardinal Giuseppe Siri, Piacenza is usually considered as a strong conservative on most matters. Stella, by way of contrast, is a veteran diplomat seen as moderate and pragmatic, and thus arguably better in sync with the outlook of the new pope.

Piacenza today asked a Vatican spokesperson to read a letter aloud to journalists, saying that he had tried to promote "a true renewal of the clergy in fidelity to Vatican II" during his tenure at the congregation, along with a spirit of "missionary dynamism."

Piacenza thanked his staff and said he would bring the "same enthusiasm" to his new role.

Di Noia, now 70, is a Dominican theologian who served as chief of staff for the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine from 1993 to 2000. After putting in three years as the secretary, or number two official, of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Di Noia had most recently been the vice-president of the "Ecclesia Dei" Commission, responsible for relations with Catholic traditionalists.

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It's not yet entirely clear what the role of an "adjunct secretary" in the doctrinal office will be, especially given that Francis also confirmed Spanish Jesuit Archbishop Luis Ladaria Ferrer in the job of secretary.

In general, however, the move means that Di Noia will play a broader role in the doctrinal office, perhaps especially in areas where his American background and command of English are an asset -- matters related to the church's sexual abuse scandals, for instance, and the dialogue concerning the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

It may also suggest that the effort to heal the breach with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the "Lefevbrists," which was a core objective of the papacy of Benedict XVI, may not be as much of a priority under Francis.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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