

Vatican reforms hailed as breakthrough for laity, despite open questions

by Christopher White

Rome — Pope Francis' [newly released](#) apostolic constitution, which is intended to reform the Vatican's central bureaucracy, has been praised as a breakthrough by church leaders and theologians for expanding the roles laypeople can exercise in the Catholic Church, even while it remains unclear how the shift in church governance will take place.

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[Natalia Imperatori-Lee](#), a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, said this could mean a "redefinition of the theology of the priesthood that laypeople have been calling for since Vatican II."

"To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be," she said.

Similarly, [Christian Weisner](#) of the German church reform organization **We Are Church**, praised the expansion of potential lay leadership roles as representing a "substantial shift" for the Catholic Church.

This, in his estimation, "could and should be a model for the whole church" to split organizational leadership, which he noted needs certain professional qualifications, from "spiritual leadership by ordained male and female persons," he told NCR.

While Weisner said the new constitution also means greater opportunities for women religious, he said that whenever possible, it should also include "fathers and mothers with experience in family life."

"A real modern and adequate reform of the Curia presupposes, quite in principle, a basic ecclesiastical law, which has been successfully prevented since Vatican II," he said.

Weisner also noted that under the new reforms, the Pontifical Commission for Child Protection will now be located under the newly reorganized Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

He noted this will give the group "more authority," but said actual effectiveness will depend on the extent to which child protection is prioritized throughout the entire Roman Curia. A former commission member has already [expressed concern](#) that the body has lost its independence.

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