



LETTER FROM ROME
with **Robert Mickens**

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The pope's dance with women in the Church

Pope Francis has named a new group of 28 members to the International Theological Commission, including five women



Pope Francis in front of a group of women present at a general audience in the Vatican in November 2018. (Photo by MIGLIORATO/ CPP/CIRIC)

By [Robert Mickens](#) | [Vatican City](#)

Pope Francis gets a lot of good press for (supposedly) advancing the role of women in the Catholic Church, an institution that invests men alone with the authority to confer the

sacraments and make the most important decisions.

But is praise for the pope in this area really justified?

This past week Francis named **28 members** to a new five-year term (*quinquennium*) on the International Theological Commission (ITC), a sort of high-level "think tank" dating back to 1969, which is overseen by the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

Only five of the new members are women.

Granted, being a member of the commission is nothing like having a top position in the Roman Curia.

Nonetheless, Paul VI created the ITC in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to ensure that world-class theologians, like the *periti* at Vatican II, would continue to have an influence in Rome.

The most disappointing thing about the people that Francis has just selected for the 2021-2026 term is not so much that few would be considered world-class (or at least internationally known) theologians.

The real misfortune is that roughly 78.6% of them are priests. In addition to the five women, three of whom are religious sisters, there is also one lay man.

Precisely 22 of the 28 members are ordained presbyters.

Not reflective of theology or the Church today

And what is the problem with that?

First, it does not reflect the reality of the theological academy today in most of the world, where laypeople -- many of them women -- are increasingly outnumbering clerics on theological faculties. By a large margin.

And second, it is not exactly a ringing endorsement of the competence of lay people just days before launching the preparatory phase of the Synod of Bishops' assembly on synodality.

This is a crucial point because theological expertise among the laity will be essential in a Church where believers are walking together and trying to discern the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading them.

Regarding synodality as a project of global Catholicism, the geographical mix of the current ITC membership is also pretty discouraging.

Half the members (14) are once again from Europe, while another five are from Latin America and three are from Africa.

That leaves two each from the United States and Asia (specifically India and Korea), while there is also a priest from Lebanon and a religious sister from Australia.

A "significant female presence"?

What a minimalist understanding of what it means to be "international".

Symbolically, at least, this maintains the status quo of a Eurocentric Church, which is surprisingly the opposite of what the Argentine pope has been pursuing during his more than eight years as Bishop of Rome.

In fairness to him, however, the list of candidates for ITC membership is the responsibility of the ITC president (who is always the CDF prefect), currently Cardinal Luis Ladaria SJ.

The president puts the names together after conferring with national episcopal conferences around the world. He then presents the list to the pope who, it is said, almost always approves it as is.

The International Theological Commission issued a press release in which it actually congratulated itself (or perhaps Francis) for "the significant feminine presence" that has now been added to its membership.

But seriously?

Five of 28 is less than 18%. In what world is that figure considered significant?

"Ad interim"

Similarly, many people claim Pope Francis is making significant strides in promoting women to key Vatican posts.

Yes, there are a few more female officials in the Roman Curia since 2013 when he became pope. But the number to top positions is not significant. It is marginal.

The most innovative move Francis has made, according to some, came in August when he named an Italian religious sister as the secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral

Human Development (DPIHD).

The secretary is considered to be the No. 2 official. And in the major Roman Curia offices (congregations, tribunals, pontifical councils, dicasteries), the post is most often held by a bishop.

Until now secretaries have always been at least ordained priests.

But the new No. 2 at the DPIHD , [Salesian Sister Alessandra Smerilli](#), was actually named secretary *ad interim*, something that has been mostly overlooked or downplayed.

It has not been explained what it means that Smerilli's appointment is just "for the time being". But many hope that is changed to being permanent.

Give them a prize

Like this week's selection of only five women for the 28-member ITC, the Smerilli appointment seems to be part of an ongoing pattern of sending mixed messages.

Francis is carefully dancing around the issue of the role of women in the Church. It is not at all clear how serious he really is, and how far he's likely to go, in advancing them to decision-making and further ministerial positions.

Next month he will award four lay theologians -- two of them women -- a prize given out annually by the Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI Vatican Foundation.

They will be honored with the "Ratzinger Prize" for 2000 and 2001 at a November 13 ceremony at the Vatican.

Since the foundation started bestowing the award in 2011, there have been a total of 24 recipients. Only eight of them have been clerics, while the other 16 have been laypersons (including four women).

There has not been a single cleric to win the Ratzinger Prize since 2018. And among the eight laypersons to get the award, three have been women.

A very nice gesture, but hardly significant.

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