

Pope Francis overhauls Vatican finances, names Australian cardinal as comptroller

by [David Gibson](#)

February 24, 2014

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis on Monday (Feb. 24) launched a sweeping reform of the Vatican's scandal-plagued financial system by naming one of his closest advisers on reform, Australian Cardinal George Pell, to head a powerful new department that will oversee the entire management of the Holy See.

The new Secretariat for the Economy, with Pell acting as a unique kind of Vatican comptroller, will have "authority over all economic and administrative activities" in the Vatican, according to a statement summarizing Francis' decree.

The aim is to streamline a famously byzantine governance system by eliminating redundant offices, increasing accountability and financial safeguards, and generally bringing the Vatican into line with accepted accounting and procurement practices.

The changes also provide for an official who will be empowered "to conduct audits of any agency of the Holy See and Vatican City State at any time" — a remarkable degree of authority in a bureaucracy where offices are known for zealously guarding their own turf.

The role and structure of the Vatican bank, a separate entity, will not change for now, though major changes in that institution are said to be coming.

"The changes will enable more formal involvement of senior and experienced experts in financial administration, planning and reporting and will ensure better use of resources, improving the support available for various programs, particularly our

works with the poor and marginalized,” Monday’s Vatican statement said.

This action is the most concrete step that Francis has taken after a months-long review of the Curia, the centuries-old Vatican bureaucracy whose dysfunction and scandals helped push Pope Benedict XVI to resign the papacy a year ago this week.

Two weeks after that, on March 13, the cardinals elected Francis in large part because he was seen as an outsider who could clean house and overhaul the Curia.

The decree by the pope, known as a “motu proprio,” meaning by his personal initiative, may augur other major changes to come in the Curia, said Vatican officials.

The new financial department will actually implement policies set by another new oversight group set up by Francis on Monday, a Council for the Economy that will comprise eight cardinals and bishops from around the world — not the Roman Curia — and seven lay experts “of different nationalities with strong professional financial experience.”

Francis’ move also removes Pell — a vocal conservative and frequent lightning rod for criticism — from the Australian hierarchy and places him in a Roman role that will make use of his administrative talents and perhaps reduce his visibility on doctrinal matters.

Pell, 72, announced in a letter to his staff on Monday that he would be leaving Sydney for Rome at the end of March. The letter was disclosed by Catholic blogger Rocco Palmo. Pell has been in Rome throughout the past week, which has been an unusually busy stretch even by Francis’ standards.

The week began with meetings between the pope and his “Council of 8,” sometimes known as the “C8,” which he set up as a kind of kitchen cabinet of cardinals from around the world to advise him on reforming the Vatican and other initiatives. Pell is a member of the C8.

There was also a meeting of a separate committee of 15 cardinals, plus a commission of financial experts, who focus only on economic matters. That was followed by a two-day summit of more than 150 cardinals to discuss changing the church’s approach to hot-button issues like divorce and cohabitation, part of a two-year consultation Francis launched.

On Tuesday, the pope is to release a letter on family issues.

In between, Francis over the weekend added 19 new members to the College of Cardinals in ceremonies in which he warned them against the kind of “court intrigue” that had plagued Benedict’s papacy.

In 2012, the so-called “Vatileaks” scandal erupted after one of Benedict’s personal assistants passed internal documents to the media that revealed all manner of intrigues and plotting in the Curia. The memos revealed repeated protests — which went unheeded — about corruption that cost the church millions of dollars.

The Vatican bank has also been plagued by charges of malfeasance and has struggled to conform to international banking standards. Monsignor Nunzio Scarano, who worked as a senior financial official in the Vatican for years, is currently on trial on charges of laundering money through the Vatican bank and for plotting to smuggle millions of dollars into Italy to help rich friends avoid taxes.c. 2014 Religion News Service

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