News



Dominican Sr. Helen Alford at Rome's Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas on Sept. 10, 2020 (CNS/Robert Duncan)

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Pope Francis has named Dominican Sr. Helen Alford, dean of the faculty of social sciences at the Angelicum University in Rome, to be president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

The Vatican announced the appointment of Alford, 58, on April 1.

She has been a member of the academy since 2020 and will be the third woman to lead the group of scholars. Mary Ann Glendon, a professor of law and former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, served as president 2004-2014, and Margaret S. Archer, a British sociologist, served as president 2014-2019.

Alford succeeds Stefano Zamagni, an Italian economist.

The pontifical academy brings together social scientists — mainly scholars in the fields of economics, sociology, law and political science — to study questions of interest to the Vatican as it develops and promotes the application of Catholic social teaching.

Born in London, she worked in industry and earned her doctorate in engineering management from Cambridge University before joining the Dominicans. A member of the order's Congregation of St. Catherine of Siena of KwaZulu-Natal, she teaches Catholic social doctrine, business ethics and corporate responsibility.

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In a 2020 interview with Catholic News Service, Alford said St. John Paul II, who established the academy in 1994, "was really important in terms of relaunching the whole idea of Catholic social thought," which teaches that the Gospel has clear and concrete principles for living together in a way that recognizes the God-given human dignity of each person and promotes societal living that is good, just and peaceful.

Particularly with this encyclical on human labor — a document that captivated Alford while working on her dissertation at Cambridge — St. John Paul put renewed attention on the social implications of professing Christianity, she said. Retired Pope Benedict XVI added to the body of social encyclicals, and Pope Francis "speeded up"

the ethical and theological reflection on what it means for the church to minister in the world.

Part of the task of Catholic social teaching, she said, is to help people realize that promoting the common good is not simply altruistic, but also is a matter of recognizing their own connections to others and nourishing their own need for relationships.