Understanding the Roman Curia An overview of the offices and leaders of the central government of the Catholic Church Matthew Bunson OSV Newsweekly –

In a famous exchange between Pope St. John XXIII and the press after his election in 1958, the saintly pope supposedly was asked how many people work in the Roman Curia. He thought for a moment and replied, “About half.”

The joke has been repeated for many years and has fed into the image perpetuated by the media of the Curia as a vast network of entrenched and self-serving careerists who resist any reform or change.

But what, really, is the Roman Curia?

The Roman Curia is the central government of the Church that assists the pope in his universal governance and his service to the people of God. More solemnly, in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Bishops, it was declared that the departments of the Roman Curia “perform their duties in his [the pope’s] name and with his authority for the good of the churches and in the service of the sacred pastors.”
The name “curia” is taken from the Latin word meaning “court,” and just as every diocese and archdiocese has a chancery or diocesan curia, the Holy See also has a central staff. The work is incredibly varied as different departments, or dicasteries, manage the diplomatic life of the Church and the appointment of new bishops, protect the authenticity of Church teachings and education, plan the pope’s trips, draft his many documents and decrees, guide the Church’s communications efforts and direct the enormous task of proclaiming the Gospel from Africa and Asia to the uncharted territories of the Internet.

There is a tradition of referring to the “Vatican” as synonymous with the Roman Curia or even the Holy See. While understandable in its use, technically the “Vatican” refers to the 108.7-acre Vatican City State first established in 1929 in the famous Lateran Treaty between Pope Pius XI and Italy.

As the name would suggest, the Curia began literally as the small papal court and evolved gradually over the centuries until 1588 when Pope Sixtus V gave it a formal organizational structure. The skeleton of offices and departments he created has remained into modern times, with many popes introducing various changes and reforms.

Today, the Curia consists of secretariats, congregations (the main governing agencies), tribunals or judicial agencies, pontifical councils and committees and several financial offices.

Contrary to the media image of a vast and secretive Vatican bureaucracy, the staff working for the Holy See is surprisingly small.

Only about 3,000 people, from numerous countries, work in the departments and offices and in the mundane support jobs at the Vatican and across Rome.
John XXIII’s joke about the workers in the Curia notwithstanding, the vast majority of members are not corrupt, lazy or self-serving. Most of them are laypeople with families who receive benefits like any other workers, including health care, pensions, vacations and the ability to offset the high cost of Roman living with access to the Vatican stores, pharmacy and post office.

Similarly, the lives of the priests who labor in Rome also are far from glamorous or opulent. There have been bad examples, of course, but the Curia’s workers — both lay and religious — are almost all professional, love the Church and serve with a genuine sense of mission, and they support the current efforts at reform and renewal first started by Pope Benedict XVI and now being pushed forward by Pope Francis.

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