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Aloysius John, then secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis, speaks during a news confere

Aloysius John, then secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis, speaks during a news conference for the conclusion of the Caritas project, "Share the Journey," at the Vatican June 15, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Nicole Winfield

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The Vatican-backed charity confederation, Caritas Internationalis, is hoping to open a new chapter this week after Pope Francis fired top managers over bullying complaints. But the recently ousted head is fighting back, claiming the Vatican engaged in a "brutal power grab" fueled by a "colonialist" attitude.

The drama is playing out as the Caritas General Assembly meets May 11-16 to elect new leaders following more than a decade of turmoil and a damaging sex abuse scandal in central Africa. The gathering is a key step in Francis' efforts to renew the confederation of 162 national chapters that is one of the most visible aid groups in the world.

In an extraordinary display of papal power, Francis last November fired the Caritas secretary general, Aloysius John; the Caritas president, Filipino Cardinal Antonio Tagle; and Tagle's vice presidents, the treasurer and ecclesiastic assistant. The Holy

See said an outside investigation had found "real deficiencies" in management that had affected staff morale at the Caritas secretariat in Rome.

There was no evidence of financial wrongdoing or sexual misconduct, the Vatican said. But former employees described a toxic workplace environment under John, where staffers were bullied, harassed and humiliated. Several quit, giving up sought-after, income tax-free Vatican employment rather than remain in abusive conditions.

When they began complaining internally in 2021, the Caritas board investigated but declined to take action. The complaints continued, prompting the Vatican to step in and launch an independent, external inquiry. The results led to the Nov. 22 papal decree removing Tagle and the Caritas leadership and naming temporary administrators to govern until elections this week.

John said nothing at the time of his ouster. But on the eve of the assembly to elect his successor, he has broken six months of silence and penned an eight-page open letter to the Caritas network in a bid to tell his side of the story. The Associated Press obtained a copy of the letter, as well as an accompanying one from John's predecessor that similarly blasted the "brutality" of the sackings.

In the letter, John insisted that Caritas was functioning well and was in good financial shape when he was fired, and said he had sought the independent inquiry so he could better support staff who had complained. He said the Vatican's decision to fire him was "made in haste, with incredible violence and very poor public communication," and had "discredited the church and one of its jewels, Caritas Internationalis."

"It is a brutal power grab," he wrote of the takeover by the Vatican's development office.

John, a French citizen of Indian descent, framed his ouster in racial terms. He said Caritas leaders from wealthier "Northern" regions had wanted to impose their will on the confederation and had never wanted a Caritas leader from the "South."

In response, Caritas Internationalis said it has spent the past six months on a "journey of renewal and communion" based on Francis' decree calling for a reform of the organization. Francis recently approved new statutes for Caritas Internationalis that will be presented to delegates at the meeting starting this week.

"We are preparing for it to be a time of joyful encounter, of sincere dialogue and mutual listening, aimed at building together the future path of fraternal cooperation, at the service of the poor and the most vulnerable," Caritas said in a statement to AP.

The hope is that the new elections will close out a deeply problematic chapter for Caritas Internationalis that dates back a decade, including the Vatican's abrupt decision in 2011 not to allow the secretary general at the time to seek a second term because she wasn't promoting Caritas' "Catholic identity" enough.

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More recently, John's 2019-2022 tenure was problematic from the start. He failed to initially win a majority of votes in the Caritas election, even after other candidates dropped out or were prevented by the Vatican from running.

Though he eventually won the vote, John didn't have a strong mandate to lead and was immediately plunged into a crisis over a sex abuse scandal in the Central African Republic dating from the term of his predecessor, Michel Roy.

In late 2019, CNN reported that a Belgian Salesian priest was appointed director of Caritas in Central African Republic despite a 2012 criminal conviction in Belgium for child sexual abuse and possession of child pornography. CNN identified two people in Central African Republic who were allegedly abused after the priest was posted there.

The revelations prompted the United Nations to suspend ties with Caritas in the country.

Caritas admitted that Roy knew of pedophilia concerns about Fr. Luk Delft in 2017, but only learned of the criminal conviction in 2019, when the CNN story was being reported. That turned out not to be the case, as an internal investigation revealed that Roy, Tagle and others knew of Delft's conviction in 2017.

Some of the Caritas staff complained about how Caritas and John handled the aftermath, given a 2019 Vatican law that required Delft and anyone who allegedly covered up for him to be reported to the Holy See.

Caritas eventually commissioned an internal "Accountability Review" of how the case was handled, but it has never been made public. No one in any decision-making role is known to have faced disciplinary measures for the scandal. The Salesians didn't respond to a request for information about Deft's status.

Luc Van Looy, a Salesian Belgian bishop who was on the Caritas board at the time, declined to be made a cardinal last year after Francis named him. He cited his poor response to clergy abuse cases and decided to refuse the honor "to not harm victims again."