Vatican

View from the Vatican



Pope Francis talks with Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle after praying in front of a Marian statue at the Spanish Steps in Rome Dec. 8, 2022, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — May 12, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When Pope Francis fired the top leadership of Caritas Internationalis last November — the Catholic Church's leading humanitarian and social service confederation — due to serious morale and management issues inside the organization, most of the spotlight was on its then-secretary general Aloysius John.

John had served as the body's chief executive officer since 2019, but an unusually blunt and — as far as the Vatican goes — clear statement on why the pope had decided to oust Caritas' superiors said an internal review process found "real deficiencies were noted in management and procedures, seriously prejudicing team-spirit and staff morale."

Even today, when the resignation of a bishop is accepted under the usual retirement age of 75, the Vatican does not state whether it's because of abuse allegations, illness or something else — forcing reporters and the faithful alike to speculate. The two-page communique from the Vatican's Dicastery for Integral Human Development, which oversees Caritas, outlining the reasons for the firing of John and his top deputies marked a brief reprieve from an otherwise frustrating Vatican tradition.

This week in Rome, some 400 delegates representing the 162 Caritas organizations operating in 200 countries and territories around the world are here from May 11-16 to, among other responsibilities, elect new leadership for the next four years.

On May 9, The Associated Press reported that ahead of that meeting, John — a native of India with French citizenship — had released an eight-page letter blasting what he described as a "colonialist" attitude inside the organization and alleging the reasons for his firing were the result of a "brutal power grab."

But in my interviews with several former Caritas employees after John's firing — all of whom requested anonymity for fear of retaliation or due to their current employment arrangements — they attested to the poor working conditions described in the dicastery statement and accused John of bullying his employees.

Advertisement

Along with John's departure last November, Caritas' entire seven-member executive board was also ousted, as were the organization's president and vice president, which might prove to have consequences several years from now.

Among those relieved of their responsibilities was Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who had served as the organization's president since May 2015 and was reelected to that role in May 2019. The announcement of the Caritas leadership changes noted that Tagle would continue to serve as a liaison with Caritas during the temporary administration.

In the aftermath of the shake-up, Tagle said the changes should lead to a time of humility and discernment and a moment to improve the "already excellent" work of the organization. John, in his own letter, said the organization was running well and he had hoped the investigation would provide a chance for him to address any organizational concerns, rather than his abrupt departure. And ahead of their elections next week, Caritas did comment directly on John's letter, simply stating in response that the recent months have been a "journey of renewal and communion."

To a person, the former Caritas employees I spoke with praised Tagle as a gentle man with pastoral instincts, saying that this general perception of him in the public eye rings true in private, as well. Yet they also expressed their disappointment that the popular cardinal was well aware of John's poor treatment of staff, sympathetic of their conditions, yet failed to intervene.



Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines, and Aloysius John, then-secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis, are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite/Gregory A. Shemitz and Paul Haring)

One former employee noted that the cardinal was much more engaged in Caritas during his first term, when he was still the archbishop of Manila, but that ever since the pope brought him to Rome in 2020 to run the Vatican's evangelization office, he's been stretched too thin.

"He does not know how to take decisions, which makes me sad, because he's one of the good guys," another former employee lamented.

For years, Tagle has been shortlisted as a front-runner to be the next pope, having been dubbed the "Asian Francis" for his emphasis on caring for the poor, his desire to soften the way the church speaks of LGBTQ individuals or divorced and remarried people, and his overall missionary spirit.

But along with the scrutiny of Caritas' operations and his alleged inability to manage John, there may also be another strike against him when it comes to those attempting to back his candidacy as the next pope.

In 2019, CNN reported on the case of a Belgian Salesian priest, Fr. Luk Delft, who had been appointed director of Caritas in Central African Republic despite being charges of child sexual abuse and possession of child pornography in Belgium in 2012.

An internal Caritas investigation found that Tagle and other Caritas leaders were aware of the priest's criminal conviction in 2017, two years before he was named director in the Central African Republic. Neither Caritas nor Tagle responded to requests for further comment.

Among those other Caritas leaders aware of Delft's history was Lucas Van Looy, a Salesian Belgian bishop who was also on the Caritas board.

Last summer, Francis announced that he intended to name Van Looy, who was already over the age of 80 and thus not eligible to be elected pope, to the College of Cardinals. Soon thereafter, however, Van Looy decided to decline the honor in order "to not harm [abuse] victims again."

But if Van Looy decided he was unworthy to wear the red hat, given the questions surrounding Tagle's management skills — along with his own entanglement in the Delft affair — might that also give cardinal electors pause before looking to him to one day wear white?

A version of this story appeared in the **May 26-June 8, 2023** print issue under the headline: Cardinal Tagle, likely papal contender, in spotlight as Caritas meets to elect new leadership.