Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis meets with pilgrims from Concesio and Sotto il Monte on the 60th anniversary of the death of Pope John XXIII and the election of Paul VI in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 3. Pope Francis warned the Vatican's missionary fundraisers on June 3 to not allow financial corruption to creep into their work, insisting that spirituality and spreading the Gospel must drive their operations, not mere entrepreneurship. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Vatican City — June 3, 2023

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Pope Francis warned the Vatican's missionary fundraisers on June 3 not to allow financial corruption to creep into their work, insisting that spirituality and spreading the Gospel must drive their operations, not mere entrepreneurship.

Francis made the comments in a speech to the national directors of the Vatican's Pontifical Mission Societies, which raise money for the Catholic Church's missionary work in the developing world, building churches and funding training programs for priests and nuns. Deviating from his prepared remarks, Francis appeared to refer to a recent Associated Press investigation into financial transfers at the U.S. branch of the Pontifical Mission Societies: The former head oversaw the transfer of at least $17 million from a quasi endowment fund and donations into a nonprofit and private equity fund that he created and now heads that invests in church-run agribusinesses in Africa.

"Please don't reduce POM to money," Francis said, referring to the Italian acronym of the Pontifical Mission Societies. "This is a medium, a means. Does it take money? Yes, but don't reduce it, it is bigger than money."

He said if spirituality isn't driving the Catholic Church's missionary efforts, there is a risk of corruption.

"Because if spirituality is lacking and it's only a matter of entrepreneurship, corruption comes in immediately," Francis said. "And we have seen that even today: In the newspapers, you see so many stories of alleged corruption in the name of the missionary nature of the church."



Oblate Fr. Andrew Small, the former head of The Pontifical Mission Societies in the U.S., strongly defended the transfers and investments as fully approved and consistent with the mission of the church and the organization. Small is now the No. 2 at the Vatican’s child protection advisory board, which Francis created to provide a response to the clergy sexual abuse scandal. (AP)

The Vatican has said it is seeking clarity on the transfers at the U.S. branch, which appear to be fully legal since the previous board approved them. The AP investigation uncovered no evidence of corruption, though a legal investigation commissioned by the branch’s new national director, Msgr. Kieran Harrington, suggested the former head may have omitted information, or glossed over Vatican concerns, in his presentations to the board that ultimately approved the transfers, officials said.

The legal review determined that the transfers were approved in ways consistent with the board's powers and bylaws at the time, the society said in a statement to AP. After the review, Harrington replaced the staff and board of directors who approved the transfers, and overhauled its bylaws and statutes, to make sure

nothing like it ever happens again.

In emailed comments responding to questions from AP, the former head of The Pontifical Mission Societies in the U.S., Oblate Fr. Andrew Small, strongly defended the transfers and investments as fully approved and consistent with the mission of the church and the organization.

He acknowledged Harrington's new administration reflected the Vatican’s "skepticism" about the social justice nature of his nonprofit Missio Corp., and private equity fund, in that they focused on food security, as opposed to the traditional idea of "evangelization" that is the primary and stated mission of The Pontifical Mission Societies.

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"I didn’t agree with the apartheid between pastoral and humanitarian work of the church then and I don't in my current position," Small said in an email response April 26. "On the ground in Africa, these distinctions aren’t relevant as they try to find income to survive."

Small is now the No. 2 at the Vatican’s child protection advisory board, which Francis created to provide a response to the clergy sexual abuse scandal. He did not respond to further questions from AP on June 3 about Francis’ comments.

Small's boss as head of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Boston Cardinal Sean O’Malley, also did not respond to questions from AP about the transfers or the implications for the commission, which is itself raising money for its child protection programs.

O'Malley spokesman Terrence Donilon said June 1 and June 2 that the cardinal was traveling this weekend and unavailable to comment.

In a message to members of the commission last week after the AP story was published, O'Malley said he was aware of Small's work when he was national director of The Pontifical Mission Societies "and have come to know the work he did in developing Missio Invest."

"Adverse media attention is never easy, whatever its motivation. However, I have said publicly and frequently that, at least in terms of sexual abuse in the church, the media has played a vital role in helping, or maybe shaming, the church into being more open and transparent in its work as well as its commitment to improving its handling of cases and its welcome and care of victims and survivors," O'Malley wrote in the message seen by AP.

"We will continue to monitor the situation and respond accordingly," O'Malley said, adding his appreciation for the commission's "great progress" in signing recent agreements with Vatican offices and local churches on collaborations.

Editor's Note: *This story has been updated to include additional reporting by The Associated Press.*