News



Catholic Charities USA President and CEO Kerry Alys Robinson speaks at the organization's annual gathering in Puerto Rico this October. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA/Elias Kontogiannis)



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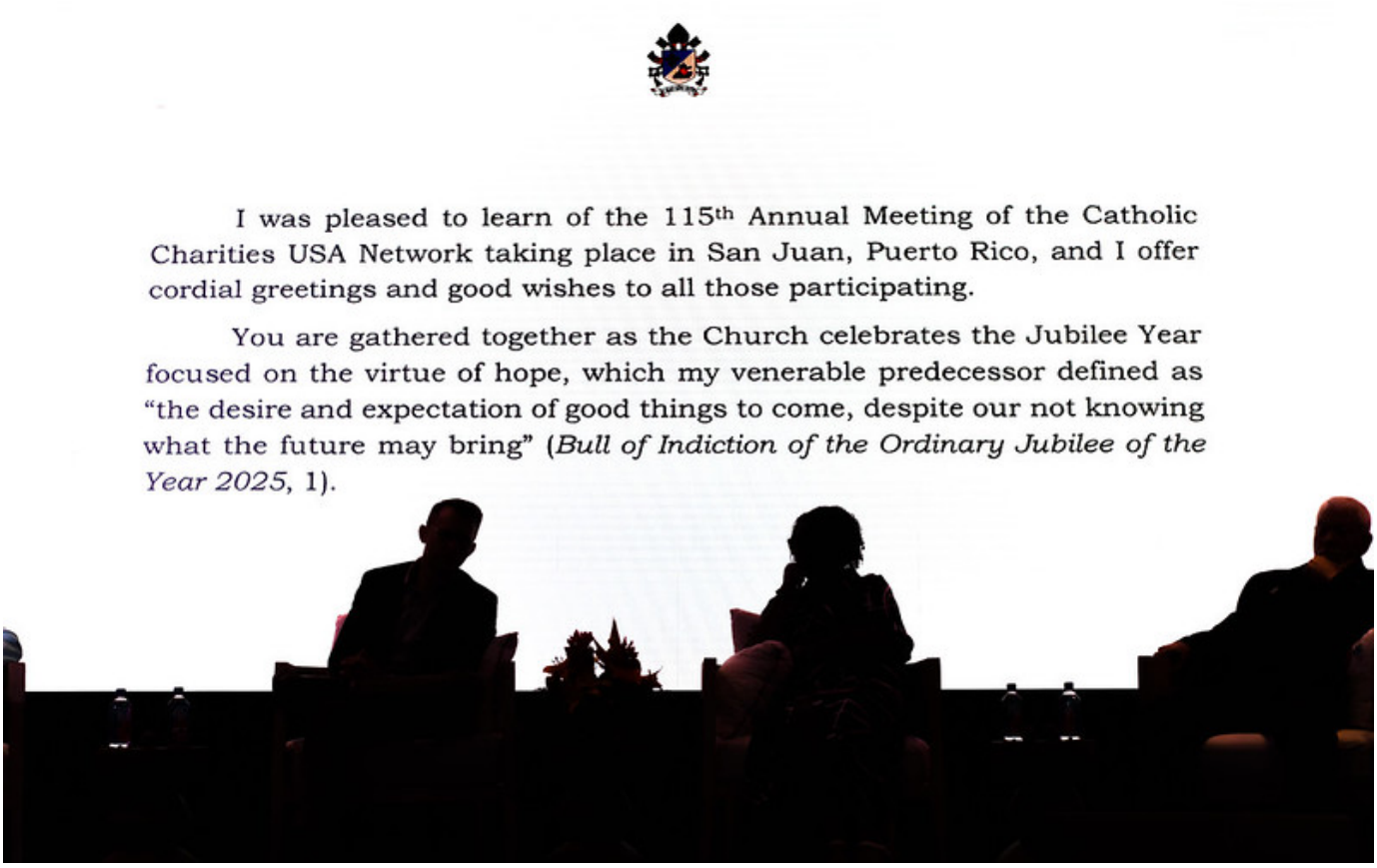
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Catholic Charities USA President and CEO Kerry Alys Robinson was in Rome when the week that would soon mark a milestone for Catholic Charities USA began to unfold. Standing before Pope Francis' tomb on Oct. 1, she paused to pray — offering thanks for his life, his papacy and his writings.

"I asked for Pope Francis's intercession that God might continue to bless the entire Catholic Charities and Caritas Internationalis ecosystem," she said.

Soon after, Robinson joined an audience with Pope Leo XIV, who spoke "beautifully about service, to welcome the stranger and to care for poor and vulnerable people." She hadn't yet known that only days later, during Catholic Charities USA's 115th anniversary gathering in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the pope would send a personal letter addressed directly to the network she leads.


I was pleased to learn of the 115th Annual Meeting of the Catholic Charities USA Network taking place in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and I offer cordial greetings and good wishes to all those participating.

You are gathered together as the Church celebrates the Jubilee Year focused on the virtue of hope, which my venerable predecessor defined as "the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring" (*Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025*, 1).

During a plenary session of its annual gathering in Puerto Rico in October, Catholic Charities USA shared a letter from Pope Leo XIV with more than 600 Catholic Charities staff and volunteers from around the country. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA/Elias Kontogiannis)

"It was an affirmation, a sign of encouragement. A reminder that we are not alone in this work Robinson said."

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, the Catholic Charities' leader reflected on the anniversary gathering, the meaning of Leo's first apostolic exhortation *Dilexi Te* for the Catholic Charities network and how the organization continues to navigate the moral demands of the present moment — from immigration and disaster relief to the challenges of federal funding cuts.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***NCR*: Let's begin with the letter from Pope Leo XIV. What was your first reaction upon receiving this message from the pope himself and what do you think it signifies for the Catholic Charities network as it celebrates 115 years of service?**

Robinson: The very first day of our annual gathering in Puerto Rico, the Gospel reading of the day was the good Samaritan. It speaks specifically and purposefully of our mission and we model ourselves around both trying to be the good Samaritan and also the innkeeper. The letter was an affirmation, a sign of encouragement. It served as a kind of balm to the spirits of everyone who was there, and a reminder that we are not alone in this work to care for poor and struggling and vulnerable people, but that in fact, we have the pope's blessing and encouragement to continue. It was an absolutely beautiful moment and a surprise to the network, and one that was very, very well received.

The pope's letter emphasizes hope and calls Catholic Charities members "agents of hope." How does this message align with the spirit and direction of CCUSA today, particularly during this Jubilee Year of Hope?



As Catholic Charities USA hosted its 115th annual gathering in October, Pope Leo XIV sent a letter expressing gratitude for the work of Catholic Charities agencies around the United States. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA/Elias Kontogiannis)

What I have been struck by in my time with Catholic Charities USA is how clearly this work and the merciful way in which the services provided to people are a sign of hope. It's the tenacity and radical dedication to uphold human dignity every single day in every diocese, in every state and the five U.S. territories. It happens so consistently that we almost don't pay attention to it as a society, but to the people being served and to anyone observing this merciful service. It's a sign of hope that won't be extinguished, no matter what the current set of conditions in which we find ourselves is.

The letter also highlights the church's "style of closeness, compassion and tenderness." Do you think this is indicative of a broader shift in how the U.S. Catholic Church understands and addresses social issues such as poverty, housing and migration?

I think that this has been absolutely consistent honestly from the time of Jesus Christ. That is the one we emulate in this work. And it is that tenderness, that sort of preferential option for the person in our midst who is experiencing the most suffering, the most deprivation, the most loneliness, the most isolation. Those are the people we are entrusted to care for in a particular way. And I love this word, tenderness. Of course, Pope Francis also used it. We at Catholic Charities are not simply a social service provider. It is the merciful way in which we behold the person

who has come to us for humanitarian aid, for consolation, for food, for encouragement, for job training, for behavioral health, you name it. When they come before us, it is this merciful tenderness that is shown to them in the delivery of services. It really is what makes us authentically Catholic in this pursuit.



Catholic Charities West Virginia staff gather supplies for a food pantry. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA/Elias Kontogiannis)

How did *Dilexi Te* resonate with Catholic Charities' work? Are there specific nuggets in the apostolic exhortation that you think need to be highlighted?

I do have my favorite one. Virtually every piece of the apostolic exhortation spoke directly to the heart of Catholic Charities, but here's my personal favorite among the favorites: "Charity has the power to change reality; it is a genuine force for change in history. It is the source that must inspire and guide every effort to 'resolve the structural causes of poverty,' and to do so with urgency." I will tell you that it's a reference to the good Samaritan. It's a reference to the relationship between the one offering service and the one receiving the service, how mutually beneficial it is. This is sacrosanct to what it means to be Christian, and we date this mandate to the

life of Jesus Christ himself, and that through line of service to the poor and vulnerable in concrete action. That is a beautiful description of what Catholic Charities is, why it has always existed, why it will never not exist. I loved the connection between the sacramental life of our faith, prayer, the Eucharist and serving poor and vulnerable people.

This is the first time CCUSA has hosted its annual gathering in a U.S. territory — in Puerto Rico. What message does that send, and how does it reflect the church's commitment to serving all communities, including those often at the periphery?

In Puerto Rico, they wanted us to come for many years and it was really our honor to say yes and to plan our 115th anniversary to be hosted there. A piece of our annual gathering focused on our disaster response and recovery work. In addition to everything Catholic Charities does in the United States and its territories, we are also the official disaster response agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S. And of course, Puerto Rico, in just the last 10 to 20 years, has experienced a disproportionate number of hurricanes, even earthquakes, and their ability to respond and to recover and to care for one another has been an inspiring thing to witness. So I think for many reasons, Puerto Rico is also a mission diocese of the U.S. There is poverty and there are human needs in every part of our country. This just felt so especially beautiful because we were enjoying the local culture of Puerto Rico and we were seeing such a beautiful example of resiliency and joy in service and that was palpable to all of the participants.



Catholic Charities staff and volunteers serve meals in Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida in 2021. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities USA/Elias Kontogiannis)

Leo praised Catholic Charities' work with refugees and immigrants, calling it an act of "bridge building between nations and peoples." How does CCUSA put that idea into practice today, and what challenges are you seeing in the current national climate around immigration?

For decades, the Catholic Church in the United States has been at the forefront of refugee resettlement work and living out the Gospel call to welcome the stranger, and we at Catholic Charities are particularly proud of our role in that. Under Republican and Democratic administrations, we are there to care for people who have been legally admitted into the country and are finding themselves in a new place, often not speaking the language with small children, and we help to care for them, which is the Gospel mandate and has been a source of joy in our work. Speaking of challenges, I would say, of course, everybody in the social service space and the faith based social service space is adjusting over these last few months to

sudden cancellation of government funds and contracts. I am far less worried about that than I am about a nefarious misrepresentation and mischaracterization of the Catholic Church's service to poor and vulnerable people. It is very hard in our modern age with social media to combat willful falsehoods that are levied against one. But I think our work and our tenacious dedication to living out *Dilexi Te*'s message speaks for itself. When you see goodness, you recognize goodness and when you see genuine compassion, you recognize it as constitutive of being a person of faith, and particularly important as a sign of Christian hope and witness.

What other Catholic Charities programs areas of coverage felt these cuts most acutely, compared to immigration? Have any other programs been strengthened because of those cuts to immigration and refugee resettlement?

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There are very few others, nothing certainly that rises to that level. But of course, whenever there is an upheaval or change or uncertainty, it is always the poorest among us who suffer the greatest amount and so we are very focused on vulnerable communities throughout the United States and how these times and these decisions and even the government shutdown is affecting the poorest and most vulnerable. We have a government relations team that is regularly going to the Hill and meeting with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to advocate for just humane policies that affect the poorest among us and the most vulnerable, which are our clients, the people we are serving. We're focused on basic human needs like food and the rising sense of food insecurity, lack of nutritious food. That's a great barometer of just the general health of our nation, and that's something we take very seriously.

Given the financial and political challenges of today's environment, do you find it more difficult to do charity work now than in years past — or have these challenges, in some way, strengthened the resolve and creativity of your network?

When things are chaotic or uncertain or difficult, it is just an opportunity for Catholic Charities to be very focused on who we are, what we do, and why we do it and that sharp, clear commitment is so palpable as I travel the country and meet with the diocesan directors of independent Catholic Charities agencies. The spirit of who we are, what we do and why we do it was so alive in Puerto Rico when we gathered. We

will never abandon our mission, no matter how difficult or challenging it may be, because this is what we're called to be and to do and it is right out of the Gospel. And curiously, I find because I am so immersed now in this work and surrounded by people of such profound generosity and compassion and skill and professional acumen and love that it is a prophylactic against the temptation to despair.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 7-20, 2025** print issue under the headline: Catholic Charities USA CEO on Leo’s support, immigration, federal cuts.