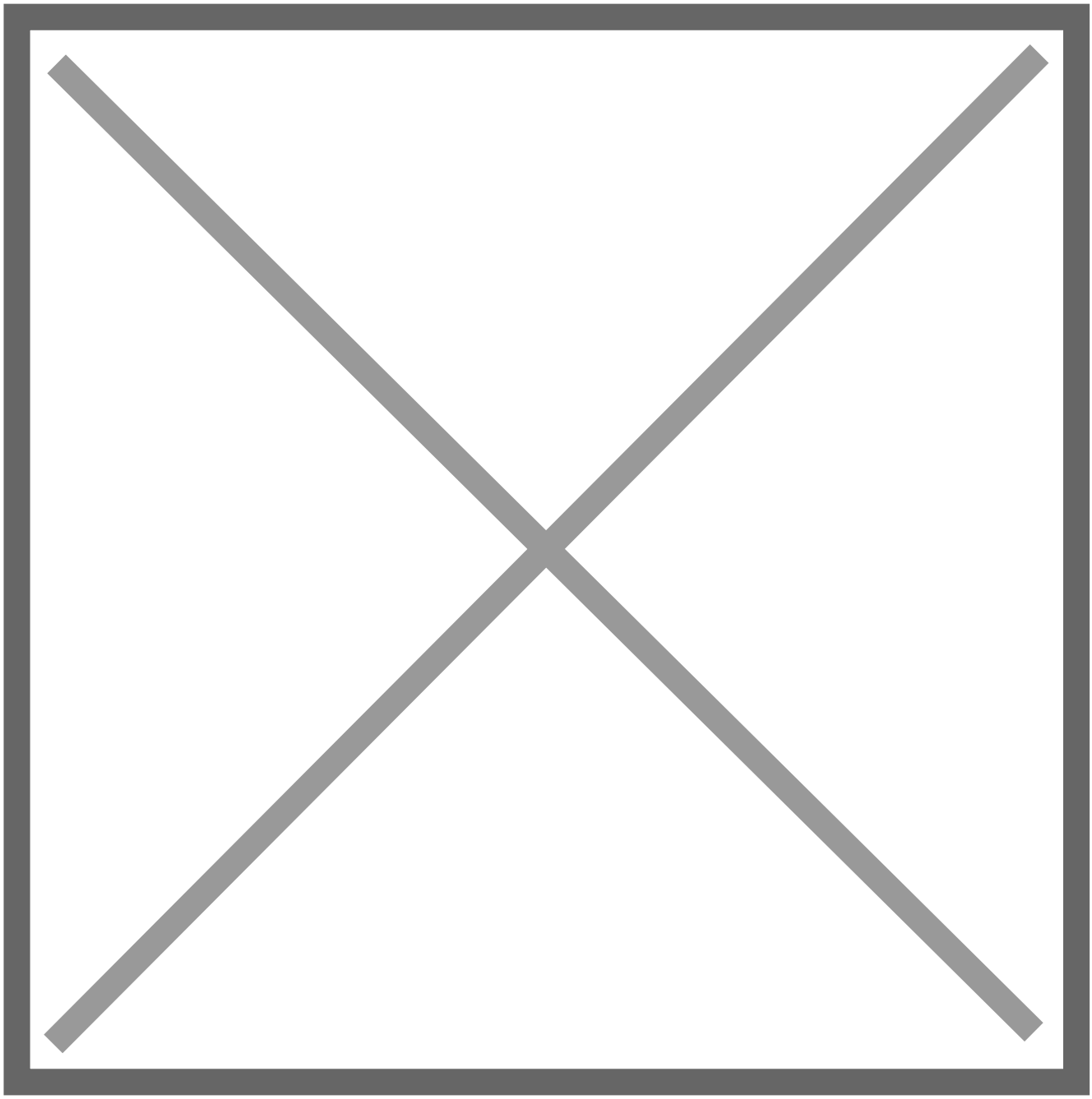
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Pope Leo XIV greets Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, as he meets with the agency's directors May 4, 2026, in the Consistory Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. (OSV News/Vatican Media/Mario Tomassetti)

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Pope Leo XIV met the leadership of Catholic Charities USA in an audience at the Vatican on May 4, offering words of encouragement to one of the country's largest disaster relief networks as it navigates growing demand for food and basic services to aid the poor in the United States.

Kerry Alys Robinson, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, spoke after the papal audience about Catholic Charities' Gospel-driven mission, its emergency food response amid disruptions to federal food stamp programs, and the new "People of Hope" initiative currently traveling the country.

She said the encounter with Leo left the delegation "deeply moved and confirmed in our commitment to serve poor and vulnerable people of all backgrounds … to bring merciful love and aid to people who need it the most, wherever they are suffering."

In Leo's speech to the organization's board of directors and senior staff, the pope encouraged their work to "seek to find solutions to inhumane situations, to alleviate the suffering of individuals and families, and to relieve the burden of those who are weighed down by hardship and strife."

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The pope also acknowledged the difficulties inherent in charitable work, from securing sufficient resources to combating discouragement, and urged them not to

lose heart.

"I am fully aware that the Catholic Charities agencies in the United States of America are by no means immune from these challenges," the pope said. "Yet it is precisely when we are confronted with such obstacles that we must learn to hear Jesus' voice saying to us once again, 'I am with you always!'"

The papal audience comes at a moment when "many Americans are struggling to make ends meet," Robinson said, describing how donors to Catholic Charities stepped up to fill in the gap following disruptions to federal nutrition programs.

When funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, known as SNAP and commonly referred to as food stamps, was disrupted during the 43-day shutdown of the federal government in 2025, Catholic Charities USA launched an emergency fundraising appeal.

SNAP, which serves approximately 42 million Americans, provides food-purchasing assistance to low- and no-income individuals and families.

Catholic Charities was ultimately able to provide 2.5 million pounds of food to families facing hunger, distributing 100% of donated funds directly to local Catholic agencies and food distribution partners serving those in need.

"When Americans are made aware of the names and the faces of hungry people, they want to help," Robinson said.

She noted that the organization has seen a rise in private giving as donors become more aware of hardship at the local level, "We're seeing an increase in anxiety around just the basics."

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"Catholic Charities USA is the official disaster response agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S. and the third largest in the country, second only to the Red Cross and Salvation Army, but the only one without a congressional mandate to serve as such," she said.

"When there is a flood or a wildfire or a hurricane, I just see people rushing in to help," she added. "I see the goodness that is common to all of us, and the desire to

be part of a solution, to kind of be bridge builders, to be people of mercy and hope — and that covers the full theological and political spectrum."

Founded in 1910, Catholic Charities USA serves as the national membership organization for 169 independent Catholic Charities agencies operating across the United States and five territories. Collectively, those agencies serve more than 16 million people annually, regardless of their religious background.

Robinson, who has led the organization for two and a half years, spoke of the spiritual dimension of serving the poor and its challenges. "That work, while deeply meaningful, is hard because you are bearing witness to human suffering every day, and there never seems to be enough resources to meet the plight of poor families and communities," she said.

"We know that in our 115 year history, whenever there is any kind of a dramatic change or upheaval, it is the poor who suffer disproportionately, and we see an increase in the demand for the services that we offer, basic things like food, shelter, job training," she said.

Robinson recalled a moving story shared with her by a Catholic Charities worker in the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, in which a man approached a staffer years after his mother had brought him to a safe shelter as a child. "'It was the first time that I could sleep through the night and knew that I was safe,'" he told her, adding that because of the help he had received, he had broken a five-generation cycle of family violence.

"Now I am married and I am a father," he told her. "And for the first time … in five generations, because of your help… the violence in our family has been broken."

Robinson reflected, "It seems like you're making a difference in one day for one family, but it can lead to ending this cycle of violence and poverty."

During the audience, Robinson presented Leo with a bound edition of "People of Hope: Faith-Filled Stories of Neighbors Helping Neighbors," a book filled with stories of people Catholic Charities serves, drawn from the organization's new traveling museum of the same name.

The museum, housed in a retrofitted semi-truck and made possible by a nearly $5 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., features 42 first-person video testimonials

from Catholic Charities staff and volunteers across the country. It began a three-year national tour in March and is expected to visit more than 150 communities across the U.S.

The book was offered as a gesture of gratitude to Leo, who in a letter to the Catholic Charities network last fall called its members "agents of hope."

"I have never seen such unity in the Catholic Church. And I've worked for the Catholic Church since I was 14," Robinson said. "This is a moment in the United States where we feel enormously supported by Catholic bishops for all of the work we do. And I think that they are speaking increasingly with a unified voice, reminding all Catholics and people of goodwill about the Gospel mandate to be merciful, that you cannot separate authentic Christian life from care for and love of the poor."

The papal audience took place as Catholic Charities USA board began a series of meetings in Rome, including with Caritas Internationalis, the worldwide federation of Catholic social service organizations of which Catholic Charities USA is a member.

Leo entrusted the organization to intercession of Mary Immaculate, patroness of the United States, and imparted his apostolic blessing to all of Catholic Charities 169 agencies across the country.

"Your work with the less fortunate continues to provide a privileged opportunity to share the joy of the Resurrection, and I thank you for this sincere witness of faith," Leo said.