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Paulina Guzik

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Through the activities of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, "the closeness of the universal church is made concrete for countless people who might otherwise feel forgotten or abandoned," Pope Leo XIV told representatives of the major church humanitarian relief organization at the Vatican Nov. 20.

Celebrating 100 years since the founding of CNEWA, the pope expressed "deep gratitude" to those contributing to its daily activities.

The pope noted that CNEWA's commitment "has taken many forms" throughout the century of its existence, "including supporting bishops and clergy, preparing men and women for leadership, strengthening Catholic education, caring for those in need, responding to emergencies and accompanying local churches as they seek to minister to their communities."

In this way, the organization "contributes not only to meeting immediate material needs but also to building up the life and mission of the churches themselves."

Over the century of its existence, CNEWA has assisted those "facing poverty, conflict, displacement and other forms of suffering," the pope said.

Centenary of care for Eastern Christians

Pope Pius XI founded the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in 1926 "as an instrument of love and a sign of hope for those in need scattered throughout the historic but unstable lands of the ancient Eastern churches," CNEWA said on its website. Its areas of operations are the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe.

Michael La Civita, director of communications and marketing for CNEWA, was in Rome for the audience with the pope.

"What is interesting is how our story is very much the same story as it was in 1926," he told OSV News. "And that is: crisis, emergency and how the people in their need, regardless of who they are, of their faith community or not, turn to the church and ask for help. And so that story has not changed."

He noted however that it's "always better to light one candle than curse the darkness. So we've been lighting a lot of candles and we're not going to stop lighting those candles yet."

"We exist to put ourselves out of business," La Civita noted in an interview from Rome, where CNEWA organized several events to mark the centenary. "In a perfect world, there would be no need for aid agencies.

"There would be no need for an agency such as ours for a response of the Holy See, to assist the Eastern churches in and how they live and witness the Gospel," he continued. "Not just for Catholics, but for all Christians, and in fact for all people of goodwill where we serve."

Seventy representatives of CNEWA's regional offices joined in the audience with Leo Nov. 20. The delegation was led by Archbishop Ronald Hicks of New York and CNEWA's president, Msgr. Peter Vaccari, and accompanied by Sr. Raffaella Petrini, president of the Governorate of Vatican City State.

Raffaella, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist, will be awarded CNEWA's Faith & Culture Award in December in New York City.

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Calling CNEWA an "important instrument of solidarity between the Christian communities in North America and those of the East," Leo said that through the charitable activities, "the closeness of the universal church is made concrete for countless people who might otherwise feel forgotten or abandoned."

A particular necessity to assist Christians in the Middle East

Leo noted during the audience that CNEWA's service "is particularly necessary at the present time" as "across the Middle East and in other regions, Eastern Christians continue to face the effects of war, persecution, instability and poverty."

Many are forced to flee, the pontiff noted, highlighting that "when a Christian family is forced to leave its homeland, much more is lost than a place of residence: a community is weakened, a living tradition is placed at risk and the presence of the church is diminished."

For this reason, the pope stressed, "accompanying Christians of the East in their homelands is an essential work of hope," adding that at a time "when so many of them are tempted to discouragement, your presence is a reminder that they are not alone and that suffering and uncertainty do not have the final word."

One absence during the audience made the papal words resonate especially loud.

Joseph Hazboun, regional director for CNEWA's Jerusalem office, was not allowed to board his plane from Tel Aviv to Rome by Israeli authorities, La Civita told OSV News.

"The staff was able join us, but Joseph was not," La Civita said, adding that it was Hazboun who was bringing a gift for the pope to Rome — a ceramic porcelain model of the edicule in the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem "created specifically for the Holy Father."

Since Hazboun was not allowed to board his plane, "unfortunately we came empty handed" to Leo, as the gift was already checked in Hazboun's personal luggage.

"I think that message is probably a metaphor for what is happening in that part of the world today, where you have these arbitrary violations of human dignity," La Civita told OSV News, adding that CNEWA's fundamental mission is the exact opposite — "promoting human dignity and the value of every human life."

"By remaining close to those who are in distress and helping local churches respond to their needs," CNEWA "enables many families to remain rooted in their communities," the pope said. "In doing so, you help to preserve the spiritual, the liturgical, the cultural and human heritage of the Eastern churches — a treasure that belongs not only to these local communities but to the entire Catholic Church, thus enriching the whole Body of Christ."

Centenary events continue

While La Civita told OSV News Leo was the fourth pope he has met while serving the organization, it was a special moment for him personally to hear the pontiff speak perfect American English without an accent.

"This is my fourth ... audience with a Holy Father. I've been doing this for a long time, but to hear it in American English, I must say personally, was striking."

CNEWA is hosting anniversary events in New York in December, with the Healing and Hope Annual Gala Dinner planned for Dec. 15 at Fifth Avenue's Plaza, in the presence of guest of honor, Frá John Dunlap, prince and grand master of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.

CNEWA's Christmas Concert for Peace will take place Dec. 13 at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Catholic Cathedral in Brooklyn, New York.

[Paulina Guzik is international editor for OSV News. Follow her on X @Guzik_Paulina.]