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Embattled Caritas head insists: 'Dialogue is a two-way street'

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NCR Today

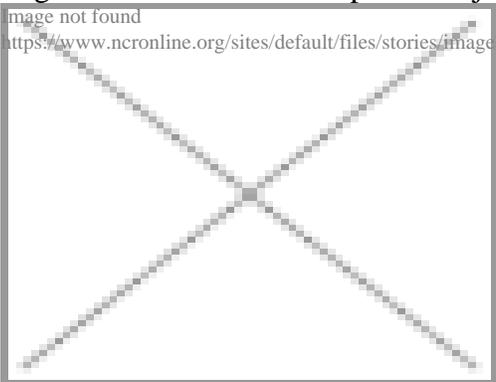
ROME -- Caritas Internationalis, a Rome-based confederation of 165 Catholic charitable organizations around the world, is committed to improved communication with the Vatican, the group's embattled head has said, but with a proviso: Vatican officials have to understand that dialogue is a two-way street.

Lesley-Anne Knight, a Zimbabwe-born lay woman who was recently denied Vatican approval to stand for another four-year term as secretary general of Caritas, also warned that if relations with the Vatican continue to deteriorate, some Caritas organizations could become 'disillusioned' and distance themselves from the confederation 'an unraveling she said she keenly hopes to avoid.

Quite often, Knight argued, the humanitarian bodies that make up the Caritas network provide a positive face for Catholicism in the societies they serve, working with the poorest of the poor, and it would be tragic if that resource were placed in jeopardy.

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Knight, probably the highest-profile woman representing the Catholic church in the international arena, spoke with *NCR* on March 1, in her first interview since news broke that the Vatican intends to send her packing.

The move capped long-simmering tensions between Caritas and some Vatican officials, and unleashed what one former Caritas director described as "outrage" among members.

Since 2004, Caritas has been recognized by the Vatican as a "public juridical person" under church law. According to its rules, both the secretary general and the president require a nihil obstat, or approval, from the Vatican prior to their election. The Caritas president is currently Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras.

An official in the Vatican's Secretariat of State sent an e-mail message in late January to a Caritas organizing committee, responsible for preparing the group's general assembly in May, stating that while Rodriguez had received the nihil obstat for another term, Knight had not. Rodriguez and other Caritas leaders met with officials to try to reverse the decision, but it was confirmed in a Feb. 15 letter from Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, to bishops' conferences.

According to the Bertone letter, the decision should not cast doubt on Knight's merits, but was motivated by a desire to give new emphasis to the "theological dimension" of Caritas, to "improve communication" between Caritas and the Vatican, and to emphasize the need for Caritas to act in "strict cooperation" with Vatican offices.

That language was taken as an oblique way of referring to complaints about Caritas that have long circulated among some Vatican personnel: that it sometimes acts more like a secular NGO than an arm of the church; that it can appear to speak internationally on behalf of the Vatican, when that's the role of the diplomatic corps and top papal aides; and that it's had an uneven relationship with Cor Unum, the Vatican office responsible for overseeing charitable activity.

Similarly, some Caritas members have voiced concern over the years about a lack of trust and support, which the move against Knight has exacerbated. Duncan MacLaren, a former secretary general of Caritas and a Scottish layman, wrote in a recent essay that the decision has caused "outrage" inside the confederation.

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Knight stressed that while the service to the church and to the world's poor carried out by Caritas will continue, recent events have caused alarm among members "especially over how the Vatican understands its insistence that Caritas should more clearly "evangelize," meaning to spread the faith through its charitable work.

The following are excerpts from the interview.

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***NCR*: There are concerns about the Catholic identity of Caritas. What do you make of that?**

Knight: When you come into Caritas Internationalis from one of the member organizations, as I did, you recognize that we encompass small organizations " as in Nepal or Iraq or Mongolia or Macau, that may be no more than a bishop with a priest or two and a religious sister " as well as really big players, such as Catholic Relief Services in the United States or Caritas-Spain. There is absolutely no way you are going to be able to put them into a frame which is going to make everyone at any one time happy.

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For me, that's what it means to be Catholic. That's the church I grew up with. It's the spirituality of ?In my father's house, there are many rooms.? Caritas brings together that all-embracing meaning of the church, where you are comfortable and welcome and included.

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How do you explain the tensions between Caritas and the Vatican?

Some of the reaction may be that my agenda has been very outward-looking. I have a sense that we have sufficient organizations and energy and resources in the church which are inward-looking. My point has been, can we also look outwards at a world that needs us and the values that we hold? We're developing a strategic framework for 2015, the core of which is the eradication of poverty and the idea of being one human family. That takes us out of ourselves to something bigger than ourselves. It's an outward-looking confidence, that says I'm Catholic and I'm caring about you ? not because you're Catholic, but because I am. I think this gives us as the Catholic church a legitimate, credible face within what is a very secular society.

Has that outward focus sometimes come at the expense of internal relationships with the Vatican?

I would agree that perhaps relationships between our organization and the Holy See reflect our difficulties in finding a way to relate to one another. Part of what's coming out now from the Holy See, and it's been put very clearly in Cardinal Bertone's letter to the bishops, is the need for improved communications and relations with the Roman Curia. The trouble is, what does that actually mean? It must be understood that right relations and communications and dialogue are actually a two-way street. We need to consider how this now actually works.

In the four years you've been Secretary General, how many times have you spoken with the Secretary of State?

Cardinal Bertone has never spoken to me. He has never invited me to a meeting or asked to speak with me. I have only spoken to people at under-secretary level. There has also been minimal contact from Cor Unum.

This is connected to the concern about whether Caritas is Catholic enough, because it raises the question, does the Holy See actually know what Caritas is doing? ? The information flow tends to be one-way. I submit all my reports and my finances [to Vatican officials]. I send a monthly update newsletter, which goes to all the top officials in the Secretariat of State. This month it will be Libya, plus the one-year anniversary of the Chile earthquake and the World Social Forum. I always say if there's anything you would like to have more information about, or if you'd like a discussion about something, please contact me. There's absolutely zero response.

Was the decision on the *nihil obstat* a complete surprise to you?

Absolutely. It was a total surprise. We had no inkling of this at all. Bear in mind that our executive board meetings are attended by Cor Unum. They are totally aware of all the processes. They knew I was fully endorsed by the board in November of last year. There was no question about what was happening, but there was no indication of what they were thinking.

Some may feel that you sometimes end up speaking for the Vatican internationally, in ways that

should belong to diplomats or other officials.

Sometimes there's a failure to recognize what it means to be in international development and humanitarian aid. My world is fast-moving. We need to get our message out to the world, and quickly. If I'm not able to respond quickly, my message and my role as Caritas simply isn't there. I don't have time to consult about every statement I make. We don't do this because we're trying to usurp anyone's authority or break ranks. We do it because that's the way our world moves now.

Donors and supporters of Caritas around the world may be looking on with concern. What message do you want to convey to them?

I would say believe in the poor, and the ability of the poor and the vast majority of the communities we serve to take charge of their own futures. There's huge hope, and huge potential for development. At least eighty percent of Caritas workers are lay people, a majority are women and most of them are volunteers. A very small percentage right at the top is composed of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The real work that's happening, and the hope that's there, is being generated by the day-to-day workers. The work will continue, and that's terrific. That's what our donors are supporting.

This is perhaps the conversation we need to have, to help our church and our hierarchical leadership to understand. If the British government, or Sweden or Germany or Canada, is donating millions to Caritas, it's because they know and trust the value of the work we do with the poor. It's not because they want to be seen to be supporting a Catholic organization. They know we're there on the ground and have the outreach within civil society which they as governments cannot have. Look at our presence at an ecumenical level in Darfur. We're one of the few outfits that has been permitted to continue working there. Why is that? It's because they know what we're doing on the ground, very discreetly, very quietly, and we have been able to continue.

Your message is that the work of Caritas will endure?

Absolutely. However, a key issue that we have to unpack at our general assembly in May is, what's being said to us now? What's being talked about now is the reintegration and renewal of works of charity in the context of evangelization. We need to understand what we mean by that? They clearly don't mean that they want us to proselytize, because they don't. But given the wide range of sensitive situations in which we work, how do we express that evangelization in a way that the Holy See is comfortable with?

How will we express Catholic identity, how will we express evangelization through our work, in a way that will not be seen as proselytism or as us not being able to deliver according to international standards of humanitarian aid, based on normal codes of conduct and good practice and transparency? For most of my Caritas people, the work that they do, their presence and their being, is itself evangelizing. They do it because they're faithful, practicing Catholics who have made a choice to be in Caritas.

What other issues do you see at stake?

We need to respect the collegiality of bishops. Each of my member organizations is accountable first and foremost to its national bishops' conference. That national context needs to be respected too. If you're Caritas-Japan, what does Catholic identity in Japan mean? It may not be the same as for Caritas in Spain. That's the richness, but at the same time the vulnerability, of the Caritas confederation.

Are you worried about how Caritas members might respond?

I am concerned that some of our member organizations might become disillusioned with the confederation, might want to distance themselves from Caritas. That could seriously damage our confederation. We have already had indications from some members that they will withhold payment of their membership fees pending some reassurance about the future direction of the confederation at the general assembly.

What's been the response so far?

What's been very encouraging for us, for me and my team here, has been the immediate coming together of our board. They came physically to Rome, to be here with us and to meet. That was one of the first signs that this is something really important for us to unite around. If the Caritas confederation can come together to say that the service we give to the poor, and the witness we give to the world of our Catholic values through our work with the poor, is important enough for us to put aside a lot of our internal difficulties, that would be terrific.

One of the things we resisted was an initial request to just cancel the General Assembly. We said the most important thing we need now is to come together, in unity, and simply dialogue with each other. The most important thing I can do in the assembly is to encourage people to be courageous, to put the issues on the table, and to dialogue. I think that will bring us together.

Caritas is committed to trying to repair its relationship with the Vatican?

Totally. It may be that my personal way of being church, or someone else's, doesn't fit a particular brand at the moment. That doesn't mean you walk away. It means you say, "Here I am. I'm Catholic. This is where I belong, and I'm not going anywhere." That's what Caritas now will do, as long as I can lead it. We'll say, we're here, how can we help you? How can we be of service? How can we make you proud of us?

Have you given any thought to what comes next for you personally?

I haven't been able to, in part because it has been a very big shock. It's been a very big shock for my team. We're a professional team here of internationals. We have to consider what this means, and I really haven't thought about anything afterwards. I've committed to Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez and the board of Caritas that I will continue as the Secretary General until the next assembly, and I will continue with a professional job of work. That's what we're doing. We're delivering the General Assembly, which is in May. I'm continuing with all my commitments, my meetings, until such time as I'm asked not to do that, which I'm presuming will be the general assembly.

I don't want to think about it until then, in fairness to my staff and my team. If someone else is here in June and July, I don't want them to be picking up pieces, as opposed to being able to consolidate work that's under way.

Do you think this could have been handled differently?

We would have very much liked this to be within the family. It has been very, very painful for us that it has become so public. One of our issues we need to look at it is, why can't we get our communications and our public relations right? It's a huge problem, and it's very unnecessary. It's very damaging for our church.

Also, it takes up a huge amount of energy, time, and resources, which we should really be putting into the

big issues of the day. At the same time I'm dealing with all of this, I've got 2,000 Eritreans on the border between Libya and Tunisia waiting to be brought over by Caritas-Italy. There are real issues of the day, and you're forced to deal with these internal difficulties. That's not helpful.

John Allen is in Rome for the next week. Check back to NCRonline.org frequently for more reports and exclusive coverage.

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