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Identity pressures at heart of Caritas ferment

by John L. Allen Jr.



Pope Benedict XVI waves at the end of a meeting with participants of the 19th General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis at the Vatican May 27. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

A rare excursion from the Vatican train station kicked off a May 22-27 General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis, an apt gesture for the main umbrella group of Catholic charities around the world. The last time a train moved along the world's smallest international rail line was in 2002, when John Paul convoked a summit of religious leaders in Assisi, Italy, to pray for peace and justice.

The train ride was symbolically fitting in another sense, however, because it's the kind of trip one normally makes with baggage.

In the case of Caritas, a Rome-based confederation of 165 Catholic charitable organizations operating in more than 200 countries, that baggage came into view last January, when the Vatican denied permission to the organization's secretary general, Zimbabwe-born laywoman Lesley-Anne Knight, to stand for a second term. The decision provoked backlash among some leaders in Catholic charities, who saw it as a shot across the bow intended to assert tighter Vatican control, and provoked a spate of tit-for-tat commentary from Caritas leaders and Vatican officials about how each needed to better appreciate the

other's concerns.

Tensions over the Catholic identity of Caritas, and of church-sponsored charitable activity generally, are at the heart of that exchange.

"When it comes to charity work, there's a continuum from secular humanism on one end to aggressive proselytism breeding 'rice Christians' on the other," said one veteran of Catholic charities who took part in the General Assembly. "Nobody's saying Caritas ought to be at either extreme, but it's clear the Vatican is pushing us further in the direction of promoting the church while we provide humanitarian and emergency assistance."

In turn, the mounting pressure on Caritas is part of a much bigger picture, which is an effort by Pope Benedict XVI and other leaders to resist secularization by promoting a stronger sense of tradition and identity across the board, including in education, health care and liturgy. As French Vatican writer Jean-Marie Guénois recently put it, Benedict's core aim is to promote "a Catholic church that is more Catholic."

The Caritas story illustrates a root truth of Catholic life in the early 21st century: There is simply no zone of ecclesial life these days immune to hard questions about how its activity reflects a clear embrace of distinctively Catholic thought, speech and practice.

Held every four years, the General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis brings together roughly 400 delegates from member organizations around the world to elect leaders and to set broad policy directions. Vatican officials who addressed the assembly, including the pontiff himself, repeatedly echoed the call to a deeper sense of identity.

"Caritas Internationalis differs from other social agencies in that it is ecclesial; it shares in the mission of the church," Benedict told delegates in an audience May 27. The pope stressed the importance of Caritas having a "transcendent foundation," saying that without it charities "risk falling prey to harmful ideologies."

Such insistence has set off alarms in Caritas circles, in part because the ability of Catholic charities to operate in many parts of the world is based on a reputation for not imposing religious tenets as a condition of aid, and in part because access to public funds is often conditional on being nonsectarian.

Alongside such practical questions is a debate over what precisely "evangelization" means -- whether it necessarily implies promoting Catholic faith and practice, or whether it's at least as much about witnessing to Gospel values such as peace, justice and human dignity.



In the aftermath of the assembly, participants said that while those

underlying questions may not have been completely answered, helpful channels of communication have been opened. Doomsday scenarios, including defections by Caritas members or a drop-off in financial

contributions, were not realized.

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‘It was a lot more positive than some people had expected and feared,’ one participant told *NCR*.

Msgr. Osvaldo Neves de Almeida, an Argentine official in the Secretariat of State, took part in most of the assembly, and participants said exchanges with Neves were constructive. Among other things, participants said, it gave Caritas officials a chance to point out that most member organizations are sponsored by bishops’ conferences around the world and take their cues from the bishops.

Observers also say that a back-and-forth in recent weeks between Caritas leaders and officials of the Secretariat of State regarding changes to the organization’s statutes, designed to better reflect the status of Caritas as a ‘public juridical person’ under church law, has led to deeper understanding.

To replace Knight, the assembly elected Michel Roy, a 56-year-old French Catholic lobbying and advocacy expert. Observers describe Roy as an open, flexible personality who may be able to put relations with the Vatican on a more amicable footing. Roy was expected to take up his duties on May 30.

Caritas members also re-elected Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras to a second term as the organization’s president.

The May 22-27 General Assembly, marking the 60th anniversary of Caritas, took place in Rome under the title of ‘One Human Family, Zero Poverty.’ The agenda was to adopt a plan of action for Caritas’ development and relief work, as well as to review proposed changes to the statutes.

Even the title, however, tripped over the cultural gap between Caritas members and some church leaders.

The notion of ‘zero poverty’ expresses a conviction among development experts that extreme poverty, defined by the United Nations as subsistence on less than \$1 a day, is eradicable. The percentage of the world’s population living in extreme poverty was cut in half, from 40 percent to 20 percent, during the last quarter of the 20th century, and many development theorists believe eliminating it entirely is a realistic objective.

Yet Cardinal Robert Sarah, a Guinean who serves as president of Cor Unum, the Vatican’s policy-setting office for charitable activity, took a more biblical view. ‘I’m very hesitant to understand what zero poverty means, because Christ said we will always have the poor,’ Sarah said in comments to the Catholic News Agency.

Sarah, too, pressed Caritas on its Catholic identity. ‘A Caritas that wasn’t an ecclesial expression would have no meaning or existence,’ he said in his opening address.

Reminders of the baggage in relations between Caritas and the Vatican cropped up throughout the assembly.

For instance, a panel that was to include Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, an English Dominican and former master general of the order, was canceled in order to create more time to explore the legal and theological implications of what it means to be ‘public juridical person.’

Both Radcliffe and Caritas officials described the move as a scheduling matter. Given Radcliffe’s profile

as a Catholic progressive, however, coupled with the fact that a Vatican official replaced him, some participants nevertheless read the switch in an ideological key.

Before the General Assembly began, the executive committee of Caritas met to discuss where things stand, and participants said it was made clear that the Vatican was not open to reconsidering its veto on Knight. A decision was made to hold a brief open discussion of the situation during the assembly, at which time delegates from various parts of the world expressed "sorrow and anger," according to an official who took part.

"It was a tough session," he said. "The bad blood is still there."

One test for whether the relationship has turned a corner will likely come with negotiations over the revised statutes. A draft was presented at the General Assembly but was not put up for a vote. Instead, delegates were asked to approve a process for conducting the negotiations, to be carried out by the Caritas executive committee.

In general, sources say, the revised statutes beef up the Vatican's oversight role. For instance, they specify that policy documents from Caritas are to be submitted to the Vatican for review prior to publication.

Prior to the assembly, there was some fear that accelerating identity pressures from the Vatican might induce some Caritas members to distance themselves from the organization. Representatives of some charitable bodies, including groups from Switzerland and Austria, quietly circulated letters hinting at that prospect.

One veteran of Catholic charities, however, predicted such outcomes are unlikely, in part because most Caritas members are more focused on development and emergency assistance rather than church politics.

"If that were going to happen, it would have happened by now," he said. "The truth is that most of us don't get up in the morning thinking about what's going on at Caritas headquarters in Rome. It's not that big a piece of our lives."

Caritas member organizations support an estimated 24 million people worldwide, with 440,000 paid employees, 625,000 volunteers, and private and public annual resources of roughly \$5.5 billion.

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