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Nuclear physicist or priest?

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Raised Catholic by Jewish and Catholic parents, Msgr. Robert L. Stern loved his faith but never planned on becoming a priest.

The outgoing head of the international Vatican agency Catholic Near East Welfare Association said that when he was in college, the priesthood seemed like a "gloomy road" and he had his eyes instead on the brighter path of becoming a nuclear physicist.

"It was the 'in' thing at the time," he told Catholic News Service at CNEWA's central office at the Vatican.

But God had different plans for the native New Yorker, and the "temptation" to enter ordained life grew while he was an undergraduate student.

The tall, spritely 78-year-old clergyman said he only thought about the priesthood because he felt the Holy Spirit calling him strongly and "I wanted to do what God wanted."

Yet it was with "fear and trepidation" that he started exploring a priestly vocation in his junior year at college.

However, the increased workload of getting up to speed on Latin and Greek, which were necessary at the time before entering a diocesan seminary, meant he had to compromise and pursue a less demanding major in mathematics.

"I started out in one direction and God pushed me in another," he said.

That priestly ministry soon took him on a 24-year-long "fantastic and wonderful learning experience" when he was asked to lead CNEWA from its New York City headquarters in 1987.

Established in 1926 by Pope Pius XI, the association serves the churches and peoples of the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe, areas where there are indigenous and ancient Eastern-rite churches and where Catholics are a minority.

Its programs focus on formation of clergy, religious and lay leaders, building religious and social service institutions, caring for children in need and humanitarian aid and development.

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But when Msgr. Stern came on board in 1987, he did more than just fill in for his successor, the late Bishop John G. Nolan. Msgr. Stern rebuilt and revitalized the agency and expanded its reach.

"The first thing was really going back to the sources and saying what is the mandate of the Holy Father," he said.

He said he discovered that the agency was meant not only to help the Eastern churches and support the people and institutions under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, but also to educate Roman Catholics in the West about their Catholic brothers and sisters in the East and to work for Christian unity.

With the monsignor's guidance, CNEWA embarked on a unique approach to ecumenical cooperation, not by basing relations on theological discussions, but on the concrete contribution of aid and assistance.

"Our policy, almost a mantra we give to our staff, is we say, 'Work as though the church is one unless you encounter a difference,'" he said.

That approach has opened doors to good relationships with Orthodox and even some Protestant and evangelical communities in the countries CNEWA serves, he said.

It took years to build up enough trust with some groups because "of course they would wonder what is the real agenda" every time CNEWA would meet with them and ask how it could be of help, he said.

But eventually someone would ask for funds to fix a leaky church roof or to send an Orthodox priest for graduate studies. "It was in little small steps like that of helpfulness that we started to develop a working relationship" with non-Catholic communities, Msgr. Stern recalled.

"In some places we almost helped build the first bridges toward dialogue with some of the Orthodox churches," he said, citing the agency's work in Ethiopia.

"The spirit is, 'We're your brothers and sisters and we're one church,'" he explained. It was an attitude which put people at ease so they would share their needs "because they're not being humiliated by the charity."

Msgr. Stern helped CNEWA extend and strengthen its programs in Egypt, India and Eritrea as well.

Having guided the establishment of field offices and the training of local staff, Msgr. Stern compared his work to being the quartermaster who supplies and manages the logistics of a national army. Such a position calls for someone who is happy working behind the scenes, building "a really good and hopefully enduring management structure and fundraising" with transparent financial operations, he said.

While successful on the ground, Msgr. Stern believes CNEWA still has "an uphill battle" in enlightening Roman Catholics in North America that Catholicism has deep roots in the East and that "not everyone who wears a sari and golden bangles is a Hindu" and not everyone who speaks Arabic is Muslim.

The myriad varieties of traditions, liturgies and attitudes within the Catholic Church represent a sort of "ecclesiastical gene pool" in which the more diverse it is, the stronger and more resilient the church as a whole will be, he said.

Msgr. Stern said he planned to spend the rest of the year helping his successor, Msgr. John E. Kozar, "learn the ropes" and fit into his new role. The priest from Pittsburgh's election by the CNEWA board was approved by the Vatican in June.

Msgr. Stern said he won't be assigned to a new post because of his age. But he is ready for whatever new adventure awaits. He said he hopes to continue to put to good use his knowledge and expertise about the Middle East and Eastern churches.

"(Or) I can run off and raise tomatoes," he said. "Whatever God wants."

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