

The Vatican and South Sudan, and a new leader for Catholic Relief Services

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 15, 2011 All Things Catholic

People naturally love an underdog, which helps explain global enthusiasm for the birth of the Republic of South Sudan on July 9. Facing arguably the longest odds in the world -- widespread poverty and illiteracy, oppression by an authoritarian regime, and chronic ethnic and religious tension -- the people of South Sudan finally enjoyed a moment in the sun, and their resilience can't help but gladden hearts.



The Vatican joined the festivities, dispatching an official delegation

led by Cardinal John Njue of Nairobi, Kenya, and the Vatican's ambassador to the Republic of Sudan in the north, Italian Archbishop Leo Boccardi, to the independence ceremony in the southern capital city of Juba.

As Phil Pullella of Reuters reminds us, the Vatican is no Johnny-come-lately to the southern cause.

When Pope John Paul II visited Khartoum in 1993, the pontiff confronted General Omar al Bashir about discrimination against Christians and others in the south. Pullella writes: "He bluntly compared the suffering of Sudan's Catholics to the crucifixion of Christ, and told the Islamic government that only guaranteeing the rights of Christians and other minorities would bring peace." (Bashir got the message, even if he didn't like it. Pullella described hostility from security forces during a papal Mass outside Khartoum as "one of the tensest moments in my more than 20 years of travels with the late pope.")

Catholics in South Sudan have been integral to the push for self-determination. Catholic entities sponsor the most important (in truth, the only) network of schools, hospitals and social service centers in the new nation, not to mention its most important media establishment in the form of local Catholic radio.

Contrary to some media reports, however, the Vatican has not yet formally recognized the new nation of South Sudan, and the two states do not, as of the moment, enjoy diplomatic relations. In a July 8 statement, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said instead that the Holy See "will give due consideration to any request from the government of Southern Sudan."

It may be, as Pullella suggests, that Lombardi's statement amounts to "thinly veiled diplomatese, whose real meaning was, 'How soon can we do a deal?'" Yet there are two very good reasons why the Vatican might actually prove cautious -- not so much about whether to recognize South Sudan, but how, and how fast.

Those reasons are:

- Concern for the Christians in northern Sudan, including a Catholic community in Khartoum led by Cardinal Gabriel Zubeir Wako.
- Desire not to stoke a "clash of civilizations" with the broader Islamic world.

The first point has been raised by Comboni Fr. Giulio Albanese, a renowned Italian expert on the Christian presence in Africa.

"The biggest risk is that the North has an Islamic identity, while the South is meant to be marked by an Animist-Christian one," Albanese said recently. "If the division is perceived in religious terms, this could have disastrous consequences ? [for] the religious minorities in Northern Sudan."

Albanese specifically mentioned the Catholic presence in Khartoum, saying that "we must not forget about our brothers and sisters."

The fear is that if South Sudan is perceived as a "Christian state," in which Muslims are second-class citizens, it could both legitimize and exacerbate anti-Christian discrimination in the Islamic north. Should the Vatican be too quick or too aggressive in wrapping South Sudan in a warm, loving embrace, it could feed precisely those impressions.

That's an especially live prospect given that the first president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, is a Catholic who attends weekly Mass at the Cathedral of St. Theresa, the largest Catholic church in Juba.

The 70-year-old Zubeir is a respected figure in Rome, and the Vatican will be concerned about taking steps likely to make his situation even more difficult.

More broadly, the Vatican may also be concerned that moving too quickly or enthusiastically on South Sudan could feed paranoia, in Khartoum and elsewhere in the Muslim world, about a Catholic "plot" to destabilize an Islamic state.

In part, that's because the Vatican has been down this road before. A brief excursion into recent history makes the point.

As the Yugoslav federation was disintegrating in the early 1990s, heavily Catholic Slovenia and Croatia declared independence, then suspended that declaration while waiting for the European Community to broker a deal to avoid conflict with Serbia, only to re-declare independence on Dec. 23 after running out of patience. The Holy See recognized the new nations just three weeks later, on Jan. 13, 1992, making it one of the first states in the world to do so. The move even came two days before a deadline set by the EC to find a negotiated solution.

Reaction was fast and furious.

Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle sent a letter to Orthodox leaders around the world asserting that the origin of the conflict was that the Vatican considered the Balkans "missionary territory," and was engaged in a campaign to subvert Serbia and weaken Orthodoxy.

Many European leaders were also upset, claiming that hasty Vatican recognition had deepened the region's divides and made conflict inevitable. French President François Mitterand would go so far as to tell Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, a fellow Frenchman who at the time was the Vatican's foreign secretary, that the Vatican bore considerable responsibility for triggering what came to be known as the "Third Balkan War." (Tauran is today a cardinal and the president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.)

Other critics suggested that by so quickly recognizing Slovenia and Croatia, the Vatican helped remove them from the equation, allowing the Serbs to pour out their frustrations on regions of the former federation which were far less equipped to defend themselves -- notably Bosnia-Hezegovina and, later, Kosovo.

Bottom line: The Vatican learned from its experience with Slovenia and Croatia that lending too much overt support to a heavily Catholic breakaway state can have wide-ranging consequences.

In the case of the Balkans, it still casts a shadow over ecumenical relations with the Orthodox; in the case of South Sudan, it could potentially coarsen relations with Islam. That's something the Vatican may be especially loath to do ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's scheduled inter-religious summit in Assisi in October, where Prince Ghazi of Jordan and other Muslim leaders are scheduled to attend.

None of this is to suggest that the Holy See won't recognize South Sudan, because it certainly will, or that it won't do everything in its power to support the new nation and its Catholic population. It may do so, however, at a pace, and in a fashion, that strikes outside observers as surprisingly restrained.

If so, now you know why.

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Catholic Relief Services, the almost \$1 billion overseas development and humanitarian arm of the Catholic church in the United States, has a new leader: Carolyn Woo, a 57-year-old, Hong Kong-born expert on the global economy, who believes the right answer to poverty is "more, not less, globalization," and who most recently served as dean of the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame.

Woo replaces Ken Hackett, who has served as president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services since 1993. Among other things, the appointment makes Woo one of the highest-profile lay women on the American Catholic stage.

In a time when two-thirds of the world's Catholic population lives in the southern hemisphere, and when the demographic profile of the American church is becoming steadily more diverse, Woo puts a face on those transitions. She describes herself as an "offspring of globalization" -- born in Hong Kong while it was still a British colony, to parents who fled the Maoist revolution in mainland China; educated by Maryknoll missionary sisters from the United States; formed by studying in American universities; married to a U.S. citizen of Irish and Lithuanian descent; and serving on the boards of multi-national corporations with global interests.

Although humanitarian groups and the world of international finance can sometimes seem like matter and anti-matter, Woo bridges the divide. She served on the board of CRS for six years, beginning with the first group of lay board members in 2004. (Previously the board was entirely composed of bishops). Woo has also been a director for six major for-profit corporations, including AON Corp., Bindley-Western Industries, Circuit City, and St. Joseph Capital Bank.

As a leader in business education, Woo has insisted that businesses and humanitarian movements need one another. She's an advocate of the United Nations Global Compact, which calls corporations to abide by ten principles concerning human and labor rights, environmental sustainability, and anti-corruption. Her contention is that businesses which act in socially responsible ways enhance their bottom line, while societies which create a business-friendly environment reap clear social benefits.

"I see the recurrent worldwide miseries as a call to make globalization work for more people, not as a justification for retreat," she wrote in a spring 2011 essay for *Notre Dame Magazine*.

I spoke with Woo by phone this week from her office at Notre Dame to discuss her vision for CRS, including its Catholic identity and relationship with the bishops. The following are excerpts from that interview.

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***NCR*: What attracted you to this job?**

Woo: I served on the board of CRS for six years, and seeing the work it does first-hand changed my life. It's not that I didn't know Catholic social teaching, but it's completely different to see it in action, on the scale and with the degree of effectiveness that CRS accomplishes. For me, that begged a question: Have we done enough, have I done enough, to really act on Christ's call to serve the poor?

What do you bring to the table?

I went through a six-month period of discernment about this position, because my expertise is certainly not in international relief. My background is in business strategy and how to align organizations to their future.

The way I think about it is this: Everyone at CRS is extremely busy working to meet today's challenges and needs. In other words, they're heads-down, focusing on what has to be done now. They need someone who's heads-up, so my focus will be on how this organization can prepare for its future, given all the changes in our environment we can anticipate. Another way of putting it is that everyone else at CRS is busy taking care of the needs of other people. My role is to take care of the organization's needs.

You've said that the right answer to poverty isn't less globalization, but more. What do you mean?

The key is to maximize globalization's potential -- and I want to stress the word 'potential' -- to advance the quality of life by creating opportunities for access to markets, which allow people to bring their qualities and talents to the table. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI made the point that globalization itself is not the culprit. The issue is bad globalization, and to correct it requires a people-centered ethics. Markets are tools; the moral energy for using them correctly can only come from people. My approach, therefore, is to be cognizant of both the upside and downside of globalization.

Sometimes in peace-and-justice circles, there's a kind of blind hostility to globalization, while in the business world there's often an equally blind faith in it. You seem to strike a balance.

Part of that comes from my background. I was born in Hong Kong, home to one of the freest capital systems in the world. I'm the child of immigrants who fled a Communist revolution in China. I saw how a free market enabled a whole generation of immigrants to start again. Hong Kong had no resources except trade, and it had to be international. However, I also saw what Hong Kong was like before there were good regulations that stood for the rights of workers. If somebody's hand was cut off by a machine, for instance, he or she might end up with two months' pay and no social security.

Because of those influences, I was driven from an early age to ask how to harness the good from a capitalist system to work for people. It's difficult for me to paint with a broad brush, to approach globalization in terms of across-the-board generalizations -- either to toss it out or embrace it uncritically.

You also cross borders in another sense: You speak the language of global finance and multi-national corporations, and you're also fluent in Catholic social teaching.

It's interesting that even though I'm dean of the business school, my closest friends at Notre Dame are in the theology department. My younger son got his undergraduate degree from Notre Dame in theology and he's working on a master's, so he educates me too.

I'm a big believer in connecting the dots. Some time ago, I led a workshop in Uganda for representatives of ten episcopal conferences in East Africa. I came away with the very strong impression that the vitality of the Catholic church in the future will require us to unify our efforts. If we remain separate little dots -- religious orders doing their projects, humanitarian agencies doing theirs, and so -- we won't have the same degree of impact. We need to pull together the energies, talents and resources of all Catholic institutions.

Do you think there's significance to seeing the U.S. bishops' official relief and development agency led by a lay woman, and one who's non-white?

To be honest, all the questions asked of me in the hiring process, and the answers I gave, had nothing to do with my gender. I don't think my gender or my race gave me any extra points. In terms of symbolism, though, it's absolutely positive. It reflects the church's openness in hiring the best person for the job, who happened to be a lay woman.

You arrive at a moment of mounting concern about the Catholic identity of church-affiliated charitable organizations. How do you see the role of CRS as distinct from what secular humanitarian organizations do?

Let me give you an analogy. Notre Dame plays football, just like secular schools do. Do we play to win? Absolutely yes. But do we have a different set of values and approaches to how we win? Again, the answer is absolutely yes. The same point applies to CRS. We aim to do the best possible work, to be competitive in our grant proposals with secular groups, and so on. At the same time, there's work we won't do, and approaches we won't take, because of our Catholic identity.

Ultimately, the animating inspiration is Christ. He is our touchstone. We believe that Jesus Christ loves us, and that love allows us to go forward and act out of love for others. We're subjected to the same metrics for effective service as secular groups, the same standards for delivery of care and stewardship of resources. Beyond those boundaries, we need to remember that the basis for everything is Christ.

One traditional 'metric' for Catholic identity is the quality of relations with the bishops. Is a good relationship with the bishops a priority for you?

Absolutely, yes. CRS is an organization that belongs to the bishops' conference, and it needs to be aligned with the bishops' thinking and priorities. The conference is represented by the bishops who sit on the board. Having a very effective relationship with the board, which includes the bishops, is my number one priority. I don't want it any other way.

Believe me, I know that I've been handed one of the family jewels of the U.S. Catholic church. Caring for that jewel, attending to the organization's needs and preparing it for a sustainable future, is vitally important to me.

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