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Pope demands stronger Catholic identity for charities

by John L. Allen Jr.

Rome — New Vatican rules will not compel Catholic charities around the world to renounce government money, officials both in the Vatican and in leading church-run agencies say, insisting that the main aims are a stronger sense of Catholic identity, including a more direct relationship with bishops, and greater financial transparency.

Experts add, however, that part of the background to the new rules is alarm among some church leaders about the influence of secular organizations that fund charitable work, including some United Nations agencies, while also promoting a liberal social agenda on matters such as contraception, abortion and gay rights.

Over time, observers say, that concern could herald a more cautious approach to collaboration with those organizations by Catholic agencies.

Since the document calls on local bishops to exercise greater vigilance over charitable activity, observers also caution that its practical impact will likely be determined on a case-by-case basis at the local level.

Reaction among leaders in Catholic charities has tended to accent the positive, praising the document's strong endorsement of charitable service and its call for good financial management.

Published on Dec. 1, the new rules came in the form of a *motu proprio*, meaning a legal decree under the personal authority of the pope. Among other points, Pope Benedict XVI stipulates:

- A charitable group may call itself "Catholic" only with the written consent of church authorities. If a particular agency is deemed to be no longer "in conformity with the church's teaching," the bishop should make that known and take steps to prevent it from using the title "Catholic."

- Personnel must "share, or at least respect" the Catholic identity of church-affiliated charitable organizations, and must also "give an example of Christian life" beyond their professional competence.
- A Catholic charity may not take money "from groups or institutions that pursue ends contrary to the church's teaching."
- To avoid leading people "into error or misunderstanding," bishops are to ensure that parishes and dioceses don't publicize initiatives that, "while presenting themselves as charitable, propose choices or methods at odds with the church's teaching."
- Church-run charities are to practice sound money management and to offer a "witness of Christian sobriety" in the way their resources are administered, including keeping salaries and expenses "proportionate to analogous expenses of other diocesan offices."

The document's title is *De Caritate Ministranda*, "On the Service of Charity." Benedict wrote that he issued it upon the recommendation of Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, who heads the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Vatican's main oversight agency for charitable activities.

In what many observers regard as a key line, Benedict wrote: "The service of charity is a constitutive element of the church's mission and an indispensable expression of her very being."

The reference to funding sources set off alarms in some circles, given that church-run service providers are often heavily dependent on public money. Catholic Charities USA, for instance, receives around \$2 billion annually from the U.S. government, while Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas aid agency, receives close to \$600 million.

Speaking to *NCR* on background Dec. 3, a senior Vatican official said the new rules do not place those funds in jeopardy.

"Government funds are not at stake here, since the government in itself promotes what is good and required for all the community and is entitled to do so by its very nature," the official said, adding that "the government should not attach any unacceptable conditions on the funds it gives to church institutions, which should be guaranteed complete freedom in following their ethos."

Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, largely echoed that assessment.

"I don't think this is addressing government funding at all," Snyder told *NCR*, adding that in his view, "Catholic charitable organizations in the United States are already in compliance with the document."

Snyder cautioned, however, that it will probably be "interpreted bishop-by-bishop what exactly it means."

Overall, Snyder said the document "encouraged" him because "it confirms the importance of charitable work in the church."

On background, a European veteran of Catholic charities familiar with the drafting process for the new rules told *NCR* that Cor Unum and Sarah played a leading role. The concern over taking money from groups with an agenda contrary to church teaching, he said, likely reflects Sarah's African experience.

While serving as the archbishop of Conakry, Guinea, during the 1980s and 1990s, this observer said, Sarah became concerned that some U.N. agencies and major international nongovernmental organizations were using their money and influence to undercut traditional African values on the family and sexual

ethics.

Sarah has voiced that alarm on multiple occasions, including at the 2009 Synod of Bishops on Africa. In a speech during that meeting, he condemned a Western "theory of gender" that, he said, underlies efforts to force Africa "to write laws favorable to ... contraceptive and abortion services (the concept of 'reproductive health') as well as homosexuality."

In that light, this observer said, the document's concern with funding sources is likely more about the United Nations and secular nongovernmental organizations than about national governments.

Among leaders in Catholic charities, the provisions on financial transparency seemed to loom largest in early commentary.

Ernesto Olivero, founder of both the "Youth Missionary Movement" in Italy and the "Arsenal of Peace" promoting conflict resolution, said the rules are needed because in some charitable organizations, overhead costs "sometimes seem disproportionate for funds that are supposed to be used for charitable ends."

In a similar vein, Mario Marazziti of the Community of Sant'Egidio said the document's financial provisions "can help avoid many abuses," which should "reinforce the confidence of ordinary people."

Most observers say the heart of the rules is a call for stronger Catholic identity, including closer supervision by bishops.

The move comes roughly a year after the Vatican tightened its control over the leading global federation for Catholic charities, Caritas Internationalis, based in Rome. The organization's secretary general at the time, Zimbabwe-born laywoman Lesley-Anne Knight, was denied permission to stand for a second term, and its statutes were revised to provide more oversight by the Vatican's Secretariat of State and Cor Unum.

The European observer said the new rules extend the same approach to other Catholic charities.

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