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Catholic social ministers told, 'Serve, accompany, and defend the poor'

by Thomas Reese

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To 'serve, accompany, and defend' the poor is the mission of Catholic social ministry, Michel Roy, general secretary of Caritas Internationalis, told 500 Catholic activists meeting in Washington, D.C. He was speaking at the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Roy was quoting the words of Pope Francis when he visited the Jesuit Refugee Service's center in Rome last year. The pope was articulating the mission of JRS to accompany, serve and advocate for the poor.

Caritas Internationalis is made up of 164 agencies like Catholic Relief Service, the international aid agency of the U.S. Catholic bishops. These agencies are active in 200 countries serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable by providing food, clothing and shelter. In his talk, however, Roy emphasized the need to accompany and empower the poor, not simply give them handouts.

He explained that Caritas is active in the Philippines in basic ecclesial communities that give the people, even the poorest, an opportunity 'to get engaged in the life of the church, in the life of the community.'

Likewise, at the village level in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 'you see women, men, young girls, young boys, take responsibility in animating the community,' he said. 'You have Caritas teams in those basic ecclesial communities; you have justice and peace groups.' What this means: 'The poor are not on the margins of the church; the poor are in the center of the church.'

In India, where the Catholic community is small, Caritas works in villages with the poorest women, mostly Hindu, and through an 'animation process bringing them to change the vision that they have of

themselves going from passivity and resignation to being active and proactive? so they can ?initiate actions to improve the lives not only of their families but of the community.? These village communities then come together and organize federations to change the local policies so ?they can access rights that they normally should have access to but which are barred from them by traditions.?

Like Pope Francis, Roy sees the work of charity as integral to evangelization. He noted that although at the beginning of the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization, Pope Benedict spoke of the two pillars of evangelization -- confessing the faith and witnessing through charity -- the second pillar got short shrift in the final document, being relegated to a single paragraph. Thanks to Francis' apostolic exhortation, written in response to the synod, that has changed.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope ?is putting the poor at the center of new evangelization. He is opening our ears to cry of the poor and calling us to be instruments of God for their liberation and promotion.? Roy notes that ?the word liberation was not often used recently. It is coming back.? The pope ?is reminding us that the sign of credibility that cannot be missed in evangelization is the option for the poorest, for those that society discards and rejects.?

The pope ?is reminding us that our social commitment is not just about actions and programs but in the actual and loving care and true and friendly proximity to the poor,? he said. ?He is inviting us to believe in the revolutionary power of tenderness and affection.? But the pope is also ?inviting us to urgently address the structural causes of poverty and telling us that assistance should be only a temporary response.?

Roy complains of ?a society that deliberately marginalizes the vulnerable, the uneducated, the poor? because it thinks they have no value. ?The world is upside down and we are invited to put it right.?

?The human person is and must be at the heart of the society, not an object to be used and to be rejected,? he said. Not the richest but the poorest must be central. ?A just society cannot be built without the poorest and not forgetting them, using them, ignoring what their expectations are,? he said. ?Let us put them at the center and look at the world with their eyes, from their perspective.?

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The church too must be ?flexible enough to be challenged by the poor,? he told his audience. We should not think we always know what is best for the poor. ?Have we set up spaces for the voice of the poor to be heard and transformed?? We must be ?ready to give up our own security, our own sureness, and count on the Holy Spirit to make that way one of possible personal growth and development.?

To those overwhelmed by the problems of the world, he said, ?We do have the capacity to change things in the world.? He believes that Caritas, ?present and helping people to change their lives,? is ?a sign of hope that something can be done if we succeed in organizing people at various levels.?

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for *NCR* and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is reesesj@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ.]

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