

Fundamental Reform Needed at Catholic Relief Services

African Bishops Speak Out at Closed-Door Meeting

Steven W. Mosher / August 7, 2013

There is a fundamental—and well-nigh irreconcilable—conflict between authentic Catholic charity and government-funded “humanitarian” programs. So say many of the bishops of the developing world. They should know, since they are on the receiving end of both.

You didn’t read about it in the press, but from November 19-22, 2012, dozens of African bishops and African presidents of Caritas met in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, to discuss precisely this question.

We ourselves only learned about it from Archbishop Odon Razanakolona of the Archdiocese of Antananarivo, Madagascar, who is president of Caritas-Madagascar. He brought up the Kinshasa meeting in the course of our discussion with him on the relations between the bishops of Madagascar and Catholic Relief Services/bishops of the USA.

He believed that the meeting was an important step in the necessary reform of the relationship between “Caritas sister organizations” of the “North” and the “South,” and between the bishops of those two “blocs.” His staff provided us with documents from that meeting.



A sister caring for leper patients in Madagascar.

The final statement of the Kinshasa meeting strongly emphasized the need for “South-South self-help.” This, it must be said, is emphatically not the normal way that the “Northern Caritas organizations,” as the African bishops call Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and some of its European counterparts, operate in their countries.

But we will let the president of Caritas-Madagascar, Archbishop Odon Razanakolona, and the “administrative delegate” of Caritas-Madagascar, Eryck Randrianandrasana, speak for themselves in the on-the-record, taped interview that we conducted with them:

Archbishop Razanakolona: “As a matter of fact, we had a chance to meet with an (American) bishop responsible for CRS (Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson), and a bishop-representative of the U.S. bishops’ conference (Bishop George Murry of Youngstown), and with the person responsible for CRS (Carolyn Woo, CEO and president of CRS). [n.b. The meeting was held 6 September 2012, in Diego Suarez/Antsiranana, Madagascar.]

“As bishops (of Madagascar) we wanted to talk with them. And we wanted to put the relations of the bishops of Madagascar with CRS at the level of the Church, because it (CRS) is a religious institution and it should talk to us, first, as equal to equal, as Church partners. And, as I said, the new directress of CRS also came to Diego/Antsiranana, where

we talked about it. And we spoke rather frankly during those discussions. We wanted to ask the [U.S.] bishops' conference to give us a ruling on ("statuer") the relationship between CRS and us (the bishops of Madagasca)]. We want to deal with the (American) bishops, and not with an institution that isn't...that has a "C" in its name only." Archbishop Odon at this point drew imaginary quotation marks in the air around the "Catholic". ...

PRI Interviewer: And has there been any follow-up to that meeting?

Archbishop Razanakolona: "Well, we're just sort of waiting...but in any case, at the level of Africa, Caritas-Africa has taken measures, Rome has taken measures to say that, from now on, the charitable works of Caritas (i.e., the works undertaken by member organizations of Caritas Internationalis, of which CRS is a part) must be a part of the Catholic Church, not as an "NGO," (a non-governmental organization) but as an integral member of the Church, and they (i.e., Caritas member organizations) must have their juridical status in the interior of the Catholic Church.

"Because, above all, it's not a question of money, but of spirit. A Spirit which says that we start with charity; we start with a God Who loves us, Who has taken us into His Trinitarian love. As a consequence, the point of departure of any charitable action is there! We start with a Trinitarian God Who loves us, Who has introduced us into His love, and Who then sends us out to share the love that He has given us: Voilà, there you have it. So there is the point of departure, the starting point. And the juridical situation of all the Caritas members must start with and depend on the bishops...

PRI Interviewer: ...which bishops?

Archbishop Odon: "...of each diocese, first (echoing here the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* which says that it is "the bishop in his diocese" who has responsibility for overseeing charitable activities), to arrive at the level of the episcopal conference (of the host country). Yes. And the legal status (of Caritas members) must take that into account. There you have it.

"For three days we were in Kinshasa ... It was a pan-African meeting; attended by the presidents of the bishops conferences in Africa, and by the bishop-presidents of the episcopal commissions responsible for charitable and social affairs at the African level. There were about 50 bishops in attendance. The secretary-general of Caritas Internationalis (Michel Roy) came; and the president of Caritas Internationalis, Cardinal Maradiaga (Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras) was there. The president of Cor Unum,

Cardinal Robert Sarah, was also there, with all his staff. They facilitated the meeting for those three days.

“So, the meeting was precisely to re-establish Caritas in its true vocation of caritas, that is, of charity. And not to have Caritas members like CRS running after money. ...

“CRS is very much questioned in Africa.”

And from PRI’s interview with Eryck Randrianandrasana, the “administrative delegate” of Caritas-Madagascar:

Eryck Randrianandrasana: “The recent Caritas-Africa meeting in Kinshasa was called [specifically] to air grievances against CRS. ... Caritas national offices in Africa do not like CRS.”

Now I understand that the Catholic Relief Services receives a lot of money from the USAID. Indeed, around 70 percent of its budget, or \$500 million, comes from this source.

And I also understand that CRS would not be receiving this money if it were to become *juridically a part of the institutional Church*, reporting directly to the U.S. bishops. It qualifies for government grants precisely because it is viewed by the U.S. government as a legally separate, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Were this not the case, the Obama administration would be more than happy to invoke the separation of church and state clause of the U.S. Constitution and deny it federal grants.

- But it is precisely because, in Archbishop Odon’s phrase, it is “chasing the money” that it cannot preferentially hire or serve Catholics around the world. To USAID, that would be discrimination on the basis of religion.
- It is because of the USAID money that it cannot run all of its programs in the developing world through the bishops and their dioceses. To USAID, that would violate the “separation of church and state.”
- And it is because of the money that it got involved in the Santénet² family planning program in Madagascar. After all, population control is one of the major goals of USAID.

Pope Benedict, in his January 19th address to the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, instructed members of Caritas [including CRS] that they must “... exercise a critical vigilance and at

times refuse funding and collaborations that, directly or indirectly, favour actions or projects that are at odds with Christian anthropology.”

Obviously, “Catholic” Relief Services will be in no hurry to give up its lucrative collaboration with USAID and rejoin the Catholic Church, especially because it means giving up over two-thirds of its income.

But Rome has spoken, and it is time for the American bishops to take charge.

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