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Why not have a woman in charge of charity?

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 16, 2011 Just Catholic

For the first time in its long history, Caritas, the Catholic Church?s international relief agency, has a woman Secretary-General. Or, make that ?had.?

Dr. Lesley-Anne Knight, who once headed international programs for the British relief agency CAFOD and worked at both the UN High Commission for Refugees and Oxfam, is getting the scarlet boot from Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican?s Secretary of State.

Looks like today?s score is Boys-1, Girls-0.

What is the problem with having a woman in charge of the church?s charity?

A German priest, Lorenz Werthmann, planted the seeds of the Caritas Internationalis Confederation in Germany in 1897. There he organized disparate Catholic social services agencies under a common banner, ?Caritas.?

Much later, Giovanni Battista Montini -- the future Pope Paul VI -- laid groundwork for an international network of Catholic charitable organizations, which the Vatican officially recognized in 1954. Then Pope John Paul II made Caritas a ?public juridic person? under Canon Law -- solidifying both its Catholic identity and his ultimate control of it in 2004.

Caritas now has a cardinal president, a secretary-general, a general secretariate (of various division heads), a treasurer, and 165 member organizations coordinated in seven regions around the world. The secretary-general runs the shop and in 2007 well-liked and clearly Catholic Knight got the job.

So, why won?t the Holy See give her a *nihil obstat*? Why does it object (more precisely, why does it refuse not to object) to granting her another four year term?

For starters, don?t forget the ?her? part.

Caritas operates around the globe and in its Rome, New York, Paris and Geneva offices in English, French, and Spanish. When Knight took up her leadership post, she did not speak Italian. She does now, but Bertone -- who does best in his native Italian -- won?t meet with her.

In fact, informed tom-toms say after the Very Diplomatic Pink Slip went out, Bertone wouldn?t even meet with Caritas? president, Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodr'guez Maradiaga, the multi-lingual Salesian who once served as president of CELAM, the Conference of Latin American Bishops.

Presumably the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* and the other players in the Caritas chain-of-command and coordinating group -- the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, and the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Health Workers -- did not raise a pen in Knight?s support.

And so the Vatican bureaucracy, operating at its passive-aggressive best, grinds away knowing Knight will soon be gone.

But why? What is their problem with her?

The list of places Leslie-Anne Knight has carried the church?s message of charity reads like the travel section of *The New York Times*. In the past six months alone, she?s given speeches in Canada, Belgium, Senegal, Argentina, Cambodia, and Spain.

You can see the collision coming. A woman -- a married woman at that -- with an international Catholic profile telling anyone who will listen that the problems of poverty and social justice need to be addressed, and they need to be addressed not someday, not even soon, but now. And, by the way, the whole world is responsible for the fixes -- including governments.

I think the seeds of discontent were sown along the Vatican?s polished corridors long ago. Bertone has never met with Knight, and she had to do her dealings at the under-secretary level in the clerical caverns.

You have to wonder if anyone ever brought up the elephant in Caritas? living room, specifically the rumors that Caritas member groups in Africa were giving out condoms, presumably to battle AIDS.

Then there is the Australia speech. At a September 2009 speech at the Australian National Press Club in Canberra, Knight endorsed the United Nations? Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), calling them ?a focal point for global development efforts and a benchmark by which we can measure our progress.?

All well and good, except the Holy See is at odds with some of the MDGs, especially the goal to achieve universal access to reproductive health care by 2015, including increasing access to contraception.

The UN reports 60 percent of married women under 49 used contraception in 2007. It wants to teach more about family planning and drastically cut pregnancies, particularly in the poorest nations.

Catholic Church? UN Millennium Development Goals? I don?t think so.

The delicate dance between supporting social justice and maintaining Catholic teaching is not for the faint of heart. In the world of diplomacy, where every comma is parsed and parsed again, coordination is key. For whatever reason, Knight was off message.

That?s probably what did her in.

Lorenz Werthmann, Caritas? grandfather and founder of its first agency in Germany, wanted Caritas to be ?the preschool for social activity" and a "pathfinder for governmental and legislative measures."

Like Knight, Werthmann was unabashedly Catholic. Like Knight, his mission was to better organize and manage the church?s response to social needs.

Unlike Knight, however, he was Father Werthmann, and so today would have a fighting chance against the cassocks and birettas who cringe at a woman in control and who won?t call her out as soon as she crosses either the visible or invisible Roman lines that cut so many good people into pieces.

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