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Quietly witnessing: missionary outreach to Middle-Eastern Christians

Tom Gallagher | Mar. 30, 2012
Mission Management

Msgr. John Kozar visits the Holy Family Children's Home, also known as the Creche of Bethlehem. (CNEWA)

In September 2011, Msgr. John Kozar of the Pittsburgh diocese became president of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), the New York City-based papal agency. Kozar succeeded Msgr. Robert Stern, who led the organization for a quarter century.

The association, founded in 1926 by Pope Pius XI, serves in the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe. It has a fourfold mandate: to support the pastoral mission and institutions of the Eastern Catholic churches, to provide humanitarian assistance to all, to promote Christian unity and interreligious understanding and collaboration, and to educate people in the West about the history, cultures, peoples and churches of the East.

Kozar, 65, attended St. Mary?s Seminary and University in Baltimore and was ordained in 1971. He was an associate pastor at various Pittsburgh parishes. He served as the diocesan development director, pilgrimage director and vicar for clergy in Pittsburgh, and as national director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the United States.

***NCR*: Let?s discuss the legacy of Msgr. Robert Stern, your predecessor, who led CNEWA for 25 years.**
Kozar: I feel overwhelmed in many ways with the legacy that has been passed on to me. Msgr. Stern is known so broadly, especially in the Middle East. He is an expert on the geopolitical realities in the Middle East and even broader than that. He is prodigious in the volume of work that he does. He has written articles, pamphlets, he?s asked to chair panels, and privately he?s been called in by high-level people to give them a one-on-one about the circumstances in this country or that country. I?m deeply touched by his love for and his concern for the poor. That has driven him. Msgr. Stern has left a huge legacy.

What draws you to mission work?
Since I was a kid, my heroes were missionaries. I went to a Catholic school. When missionary priests would come through, they would have typical vocation talks. Maryknoll Fathers came to our school and they were larger-than-life figures to me. In high school seminary, I was president of the mission club. I was always interested in mission work. As a kid, that sense of adventure really grabbed me. In the early 1960s, I went to a

national mission conference at the University of Notre Dame and met a bishop who was imprisoned in China. Wow, you talk about being larger-than-life. I wanted to be close to people suffering in the missions.

So what have the first several months been like?
I came onboard on Sept. 15, 2011, I had meetings with Msgr. Stern and then I had an intense week of meetings with key personnel. These meetings allowed for the big picture to be brought down a little bit and it allowed me to ask a lot of questions. I was only here one week when I hosted a plenary meeting with my international directors, which had been scheduled the year before. I really felt more than anything else that I was supposed to be here. When I connected the dots of my life, this was where I was supposed to be. We had five wonderful days of stepping outside the box in order that we all could look inside the box together. We are one CNEWA even though we have offices in eight different countries. We are one family, as we are one in Christ.

With respect to the governance of CNEWA, can you clarify how it works?
Yes, there are two boards. One of which I call the ?mother board? and that?s chaired by Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York and is created by mandate of the Holy See and entrusted to the New York archdiocese. There is a smaller board and has a member from Canada?s board. Canada by law must have its own board to be able to solicit funds that go out of the country. In the U.S., we have a dichotomy of two CNEWAs. One is more on the development end called CNEWA U.S. and the other is just CNEWA.

As a papal agency based in the U.S., what does that mean in terms of your mission? What?s the real flavor of the organization?
It?s pontifical by its charter and its mandate. It reflects an extension of the Holy Father and his outreach to Oriental Catholics and Oriental brothers and sisters in the Orthodox church, as a gesture of goodwill. But at the same time there is an active dimension of partnership on an episcopal level. We try to always stress in the field the acceptance of help and outreach of the Holy Father. In terms of the U.S. marketplace, with bishops as board members, it?s very helpful to have that episcopal dimension.

How should all Catholics understand exactly what is the ?Holy Land??
I think a lot of people when they hear the term ?Holy Land? think of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Galilee, and in effect, they think of the state of Israel. We have to broaden the understanding there to really reach into Lebanon, Jordan, and even Egypt and Ethiopia because if you?re really biblical, these are all part of the Holy Land. When we talk about Palestinian people, we have to look at what was, what is and what may be in the future. CNEWA tries to broaden the definition.

What is the relationship between CNEWA and the U.S. bishops? conference?
I have visitor?s status and we host one of our board meetings at the U.S. bishops? meetings. I see one of my roles as being present at bishops? meetings, presenting the needs of CNEWA to bishops.

What are the priorities for CNEWA?
The biggest area of distribution would relate to child and child care support in the form of orphans in orphanages or in other special care institutions, for example, special learning institutions for the blind or the deaf, as well as schools. Part of that is the witness of educating Muslim children. We?re trying to offer an alternative to the violence that is so prevalent in so many of these areas. Or where children in other circumstances could be indoctrinated in a whole different direction, even at the university level. Bethlehem University has many Muslim students and it?s considered a treasure. It really gives young people a chance, an opportunity for a real future other than what might have been. CNEWA played a significant role in the university?s founding. It?s run by the Christian Brothers.

Another priority is the pastoral needs in terms of helping a particular diocese or metropolitan with some of the basic needs.

Another priority is ecumenical as between Orthodox and Catholics; it?s one of CNEWA?s callings.

As a practical matter, how does CNEWA operate? How do keep your thumb on the pulse of the system, the 121 employees you call ?family??
The directors we have in place and their staffs and the very fluid and active relationships they have with [local] church leaders, not only the hierarchs, but people in communities that are really religious leaders even though they are not ordained provide for good communication and presence. That?s what mission life is all about. The presence of our CNEWA family in its most extended sense is so good at this active ebb and flow of information, evaluation of programs and making recommendations so that when things come up to the international level for consideration for distribution, diminution or termination or a new need, we are able to do so.

Email is very important to us. We have coordinators for the zones they cover and who are mandated to have at least weekly, lengthy phone conversations. I convene a virtual meeting every six weeks.

How busy is your travel schedule?
In December, I was in Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. My immediate goal is to get to all of the eight offices and to the extended outreaches. For example, Lebanon covers Syria and Egypt. Jordan covers Iraq. I want to get to Ethiopia and to India. A lot of our resources go to Kerala State [southern India] because one of the largest Eastern-rite churches is the Syro-Malabar church.

With respect to the persecution of Christians, are CNEWA personnel at risk or do they try to step in after the fact to assist the victims?
From my vantage point, I would say the CNEWA gives a quiet witness on behalf of the Holy Father by reaching out in an even way, not distinguishing to all of our brothers and sisters, whether it?s in helping the children, with health care and clinics that welcome anyone and everyone. We are quiet witnesses of the peace of Christ and the oneness of Christ. We are not politically out there. We are not stirring up the hornets? nest. We are men and women of goodwill in the name of Christ.

What is the makeup of your revenues?
Over 80 percent of our revenue comes from U.S. donors. We have some European agencies that donate to our work. We provide the vehicle to distribute grants from these agencies because we have in place an office and personnel and can assure that these donations go where they are meant to go and the work is being accomplished.

What message do you intend to convey to U.S. Catholics?
I?m firmly convinced that CNEWA is a jewel that people need to put in their hands and look at under a light. CNEWA sparkles. There is something really wonderful that people of goodwill enable by supporting CNEWA. There is a temptation to write off some of these areas of the world as beyond hope, but in spite of all that, I have already come to see the measure of hope that CNEWA can engender in people in as simple ways such as a child who was crying is now smiling, a mother who was destitute and carrying a baby is now filled with hope. A child who has never sat on a bench for formal education is now going to school, or a bishop or patriarch is now able to extend a pastoral outreach that would not otherwise be possible.

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Online Resources

Catholic Near East Welfare Association
www.cnewa.org

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