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Vatican imposes new controls on charity federation

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NCR Today

ROME -- After moving last year to block the re-election of the first laywoman to head *Caritas Internationalis*, the Rome-based confederation of Catholic charitable agencies around the world, over an alleged "lack of coordination" with papal aides, the Vatican today imposed sweeping new rules that effectively tightens its control over Caritas' finances and global operations.

Among other points, the rules require the top officials of Caritas to make promises of loyalty before a Vatican official, including "Christian obedience" to church leaders.

Aside from its direct importance for Catholic charities, today's Vatican move is also interesting for the recently decreed overhaul of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious in the United States, the country's main umbrella group for superiors of women's orders.

Like LCWR, Caritas Internationalis is a juridical person under church law recognized by the Vatican. The new rules are thus a further indication that the Vatican is in earnest about tightening its grip over groups that enjoy official status and, in some sense, represent the church.

The rules came in the form of a "General Decree," released today in the name of Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State.

Composed of nine articles, the rules specify that:

- The Vatican office which oversees Caritas is the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, and it has the power to approve in advance "any text with doctrinal or moral content or orientations," which may also be submitted to the review of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

- Cor Unum will appoint an ecclesiastical assistant to Caritas, whose role will be to promote its Catholic identity.
- Cor Unum must approve any cooperative agreements between Caritas and non-governmental organizations, except in cases of dire humanitarian emergencies. (In the past, Caritas had been criticized for entering into agreements with NGOs whose approach to issues such as population control differs from that of the Catholic church.)
- Caritas officials are required to report any contact with foreign governments or diplomatic missions to the Secretariat of State. (Also in the past, Caritas has been criticized for conducting a sort of "parallel diplomacy" alongside the Vatican's official diplomatic apparatus.)
- Cor Unum, in consultation with the Secretariat of State, must approve various sectors of Caritas' financial operations, such as wages, contracts and the review of budgets.
- Top officials of Caritas Internationalis must pronounce loyalty oaths before the president of Cor Unum, who is currently Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea. The officials are required to vow "always to conserve communion with the Catholic church, both in word and in mode of acting," to preserve and transmit "faithfully the deposit of faith, rejecting any doctrine contrary to it," and to "observe Christian obedience to what the Sacred Pastors declare as authentic doctors and teachers of the faith, or stabilize as leaders of the church."

The decree was accompanied by a commentary written by Msgr. Osvaldo Neves de Almeida, an Argentine priest of Opus Dei who serves as an official in the Secretariat of State. Neves argued that the new rules come out of a series of meetings with Caritas Internationalis and Vatican officials, and that much of the content is already in place.

Neves wrote that the new rules are "of significant assistance to the institution, worthy of the human and spiritual quality and professionalism of its officers," and that they will enhance "the distinctive identity of Caritas Internationalis, which is both its strength and the source of its particular efficacy."

In January 2011 the Vatican denied approval for the then-secretary-general of Caritas, Zimbabwe-born laywoman Lesley-Anne Knight, to stand for a second term, a move seen as pushing Caritas to become more evangelical as well as more firmly committed to church teaching.

Knight's successor at Caritas, French secretary general Michel Roy, welcomed the new rules.

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"Our immense gratitude to Pope Benedict for granting these new Statutes and Rules and the staff of the Holy See who have worked with us through this long process," he said. "The new Statutes and Rules clarifies that Caritas Internationalis is an organisation both at the service of the confederation members and of the Holy See."

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