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New rules aim to beef up Catholic identity of church charities

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NCR Today

Rome — A mounting campaign by church authorities to foster a stronger sense of traditional Catholic identity reached deeper into the realm of Catholic charitable activity Saturday with new papal rules directing bishops to exercise greater vigilance and control.

Among other things, the new rules appear to tighten the scope for Catholic charities to collaborate with groups with whom they may share specific interests, but which also take positions that conflict with Catholic teaching. In effect, the rules appear to be a response to perceptions voiced over the years that some church-run charities are more similar to secular NGOs and humanitarian groups than to distinctly Catholic operations.

Specifically, Pope Benedict XVI's legal document, technically known as a *motu proprio*, stipulates that:

- A charitable group may call itself "Catholic" only with the written consent of church authorities. If a particular outfit is deemed to be no longer "in conformity with the church's teaching," the bishop should make that known and take steps to prevent it from using the title "Catholic."
- Personnel must "share, or at least respect" the Catholic identity of church-affiliated charitable organizations, and must also "give an example of Christian life" beyond their professional competence.
- A Catholic charity may not take money "from groups or institutions that pursue ends contrary to the church's teaching."
- To avoid leading people "into error or misunderstanding," bishops are to ensure that parishes and dioceses don't publicize initiatives "which, while presenting themselves as charitable, propose choices or methods at odds with the church's teaching."

The title of the new papal edict is *De Caritate ministranda*, "On the service of charity," and it was published Saturday on the Vatican web site. Benedict wrote that he issued the document upon the recommendation of Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, who heads the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Vatican's main oversight agency for charitable activities.

Benedict's document also calls on Catholic charities to be transparent in the administration of funds, to make regular financial reports, and to ensure that expenses and salaries are "proportionate" to the budgets of other church offices.

The new regulations come roughly a year after the Vatican moved to tighten its control over the leading global federation for Catholic charities, the Rome-based Caritas Internationalis. The organization's secretary general at the time, Zimbabwe-born laywoman Lesley-Anne Knight, was denied Vatican permission to stand for a second term, and the organization's statutes were revised to provide greater oversight by Vatican authorities, especially Cor Unum.

Among other things, the Vatican appeared to want Caritas, and Catholic charities generally, to have a more specifically "missionary" orientation, meaning promoting the faith alongside meeting basic humanitarian needs.

One veteran of the Catholic charities scene summed things up this way at the time in a background comment to *NCR*: "When it comes to charity work, there's a continuum from secular humanism on one end to aggressive proselytism breeding 'rice Christians' on the other. Nobody's saying Caritas ought to be at either extreme, but it's clear the Vatican is pushing us further in the direction of promoting the church while we provide humanitarian and emergency assistance."

In Saturday's document, Benedict XVI insisted that "The service of charity is a constitutive element of the church's mission and an indispensable expression of her very being."

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