

Sudan bishop fights removal from charity fund bearing his name

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 18, 2013

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A Sudanese Catholic bishop is suing a U.S.-based fund bearing his name that raised millions in aid for people in his region, saying he has been unlawfully expelled as the fund's chairman and that it is taking advantage of his reputation without permission.

Bishop Macram Gassis, head of Sudan's El Obeid diocese, filed the suit in September in Delaware, where his Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund is incorporated.

The fund, which was founded in 1999 and lists its headquarters in tax filings at a Washington, D.C., address, raised \$4.2 million in 2011, about half of which went to either the El Obeid diocese or directly to school and hospital construction projects in South Sudan.

Details of the bishop's suit against the fund remain vague, as his initial Sept. 6 complaint, filed in Delaware's Court of Chancery, is sealed under court order, along with many of the accompanying entries.

But redacted versions of court filings available for public review say the bishop is alleging the fund's board of directors planned without his knowledge to oust him Sept. 21 on his 75th birthday, when canon law requires that bishops offer their resignation as heads of their dioceses.

While the El Obeid diocese has a coadjutor bishop, a type of auxiliary bishop appointed by the pope to automatically take over as head of a diocese when its current bishop resigns, dies or retires, the Vatican has not announced whether Pope Francis has accepted Gassis' resignation.

According to the redacted version of the bishop's complaint, Gassis says the fund's executive director, Neil Corkery, initiated several meetings of the fund's board over past months without the bishop's knowledge, leading to the calling of an Aug. 24 meeting at which the board voted to expel the bishop and rename the organization.

Gassis says Corkery and the board's action violated 15 counts of Delaware civil law and asks the court to put the fund into receivership because of "extreme circumstances causing imminent danger of great loss which cannot be otherwise prevented."

The bishop also asks the court to strike a series of five resolutions passed in the Aug. 24 board meeting and appoint a special master to hold a new annual meeting and oversee election of new board members.

Messages sent to Gassis at email addresses he previously used were returned as undeliverable. The firm that filed the suit on the bishop's behalf, Blank Rome LLP, also did not return phone calls or emails for comment.

Corkery said in a phone interview he could not comment on the details of the lawsuit because it is still pending, but he said the fund removed Gassis in accordance with its bylaws. Those bylaws, he said, "specifically stated

that [Gassis] would resign from the organization on his retirement."

"The bishop turned 75 [in] September," Corkery said. "He also has a number of health problems. As a result of turning 75, he has to retire."

"It's not really a matter of being expelled," Corkery said. "But [Gassis] would have preferred, I think, to stay on. Obviously, as a result, you've got a lawsuit here. But we're just following what we understand to be the canon law."

Corkery, who has also served as the treasurer of the traditional-marriage lobbying group Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, is listed on the fund's board along with his wife, Ann. They are two of six defendants named in Gassis' suit.

In his 50-page complaint filing, Gassis says the fund's bylaws state: "The Chairman of the Board shall be His Excellency, Bishop Macram Max Gassis, Bishop of El Obeid Diocese, Sudan. He shall serve in this position until his retirement or resignation."

The fund has changed its name to reflect Gassis' removal, Corkery said, to the "Sudan Relief Fund." Corkery also said a letter had been sent through email to donors explaining the name change.

That letter, provided by Corkery, does not mention Gassis' removal but lists Corkery as the organization's president and executive director.

"We ... write to let you know about an important and inspiring change for the Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund," the letter says. "In recognition of the recent success of South Sudan in obtaining its freedom we are delighted to announce the name of the Fund has changed to the Sudan Relief Fund."

Sudan's El Obeid diocese encompasses nearly the entire eastern half of the country, bordered at the north by Egypt and the east by the Red Sea, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Gassis has served as the diocese's bishop since 1988.

He first served as the diocese's apostolic administrator, appointed in 1983 at the start of the 22-year Second Sudanese Civil War. Sudan split into two countries in July 2011, with the southern half of the nation recognized internationally as South Sudan.

The website for the relief fund, originally hosted at the domain BishopGassis.org, now redirects to SudanReliefFund.com [1].

Summaries of the fund's mission and financial statements at third-party charity evaluation sites state that it was founded "at the height" of the 1983-2005 war to facilitate funding of the drilling of water wells.

On its 2011 tax filings, the fund says it had revenue that year of \$4.2 million, with expenses of \$2.96 million.

According to the filings, the fund's two largest expenses that year -- totaling \$1.03 million and \$494,000 -- were wire transfers to the El Obeid diocese "for operations and capacity building" and for construction of a hospital, primary school and job-training center.

Over the last several years, Gassis has been a guest numerous times on the Catholic television network EWTN, commenting on the state of the church and society in Sudan and asking viewers to donate to the relief fund.

In a July 25 appearance on EWTN's "The World Over with Raymond Arroyo," Gassis asked viewers to instead contact him directly about making donations for his efforts through an email address hosted by the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, his religious order.

Charla Patchman, a development associate for the missionaries' North American province, said in a phone interview that the bishop had visited their Ohio offices in the spring and asked that funds meant for his work go through them.

The province, Patchman said, keeps a separate fund for the bishop and forwards the money to him through wire transfer. All of the donations submitted to the missionaries with a note requesting they be given to the bishop are forwarded on, she said.

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[1] <http://www.SudanReliefFund.com>

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