NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

US Catholics come to aid of Eastern European churches

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 21, 2012

The interior of a rural Armenian Catholic church (Courtesy of Caritas Armenia)

The Subcommittee on Aid to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe is one of the smaller offices at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, with only two full-time staffers. But the office may pack more punch for the dollar than many other initiatives because its work in helping to rebuild the churches in former communist countries is yielding a harvest of grace.

The subcommittee is part of the bishops? National Collections Office and was begun in 1990, the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The prime mover was Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, then archbishop of Newark, N.J. Since then, more than $100 million has been raised from the faithful in the United States and distributed to projects in the former communist countries, according to Declan Murphy, the subcommittee?s director. Murphy came to this job at the bishops? conference after working as chief of staff to the Librarian of Congress for six years, but he said of his work for the conference, ?This is the hardest job I?ve ever had in my life.?

Murphy said he is always struck by how the contributions to these national collections display the catholicity of the church. ?We received a check for $25,000 from the diocese of Burlington, Vt.,? he said. ?And I thought to myself -- there are no Eastern Europeans in Vermont! It is just Catholics wanting to help other Catholics.? Murphy explained that the U.S. bishops? conference also works on many projects with the German bishops? conference, but he noted the Germans are mostly interested in close-in European countries while the U.S. bishops are also helping in Kazakhstan and Armenia. During World War II, many Poles and Lithuanians were exiled to Kazakhstan. Armenia?s Christian roots are ancient. Both countries face unimaginable poverty, especially in the rural areas.

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which communist regimes decimated the churches of the 28 countries the collection assists. For example, in Albania, 95 percent of churches were razed and only 30 priests were active at the end of the communist regime, one-tenth of the number serving in Albania before the revolution.

Ukraine was especially hard-hit as oftentimes Russian Orthodox clergy collaborated with communist authorities to root out Eastern rite Catholics. ?The government had decimated not just the church buildings, but especially the human capital,? said Spokane, Wash., Bishop Blase Cupich, who heads the subcommittee. ?All non-Russian-Orthodox hierarchies were suppressed or killed.? Today, the church in the Ukraine is trying to rebuild and as

one can imagine after so many years of repression, the Catholic clergy are very young, including the newly elected patriarch, 42-year-old Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk. In Ukraine and other former Soviet Republics, the Russian government is still trying to exert pressure. ?The church is needed not only for the future of the Gospel, but for the future of these countries,? Cupich said.

The collection in the U.S. has helped fund a range of projects in Ukraine. Clergy were sent to Rome and to the U.S. for advanced degrees. Early on, McCarrick helped the local church buy properties so they could build new churches throughout the country and to invest in a seminary to deal with the exploding number of vocations. The monies also fund catechetical and pastoral projects as the church tries to re-establish its intellectual life.

Cupich said one project especially moved him. Under communism, all the church?s properties were confiscated, so now the government has been turning over some properties to the church as compensation. One such building was formerly the KGB headquarters. The patriarch chose to make this his pastoral center, and U.S. assistance helped pay for the complete renovation of the building. Except the basement. ?Bishops and priests had been tortured in that basement. There were many martyrs. The new patriarch said, ?Let?s renovate everything, but that we should leave as a testament.? He was undoubtedly right,? Cupich said.

Murphy said he hopes people who donate recognize how much good work their contributions accomplish. ?I worry that people may think everything is fine now that communism is gone. The work is by no means done over there. There are social problems that only the church is addressing, such as the abuse of women.? He noted that even in Poland, which has joined the Eurozone, the eastern regions are quite poor.

Cupich is Croatian, and so he has a soft spot for the church in Eastern Europe. ?It is true for a lot of Catholics, I think,? he said. ?There is a real desire to be of help to the lands from which our ancestors came. They brought a deep sense of faith to these shores which built the church in the United States. We now have a responsibility to try and help them rebuild their church.?

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/12/2013 - 10:36*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/us-catholics-come-aid-eastern-european-churches