

Vatican issues new guidelines for Catholic charities

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c. 2012 Religion News Service VATICAN CITY (RNS) Under new rules announced on Wednesday (May 2), the Vatican will more closely oversee the operations of Caritas Internationalis, a global confederation of 162 national Catholic charities. The decision comes after the Vatican last year vetoed the re-election of the organization's then-secretary general, Lesley-Anne Knight, complaining of a lack of coordination with Vatican officials.

The new rules issued by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, will require all Caritas Internationalis officials make a formal promise of fidelity to church teachings and leaders.

The organization is now under the supervision of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum", which oversees the Catholic Church's charitable activities, while the pope is given the right to appoint three of its board members. Bishop Bernard Hebda of Gaylord, Mich., has been chosen as one of the Vatican-appointed board members.

From now on, all Caritas Internationalis statements -- particularly "any text with doctrinal or moral content or orientations" -- and activities will have to be authorized in advance by the Vatican, except in case of "grave humanitarian emergencies."

"Cor Unum" will also appoint an ecclesiastical assistant tasked with promoting the "Catholic identity" of Caritas Internationalis, and the Vatican's Secretariat of State will closely supervise the confederation's contacts with foreign governments.

The new rules will not directly affect Catholic Relief Services, the official aid agency of the U.S. Catholic bishops. But Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the pontifical council, explained in L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's semiofficial newspaper, that bishops could be "inspired" by the new rules to revise the statutes of national Catholic charities.

The Vatican move is part of a more general drive to promote Catholic identity in Catholic aid operations at all levels. Critics have complained that Catholic charities operate often like secular nongovernmental organizations and partner with groups that sometimes don't share Catholic values, including the church's opposition to birth control.

In a message addressed to the confederation's general assembly last May, Pope Benedict XVI warned that without an explicit reference to God, aid work risked "falling prey to harmful ideologies." He also warned that, as Caritas Internationalis shared the church's mission, the Holy See was entitled to exercise oversight of its operations.

According to Caritas Internationalis secretary general, Michel Roy, the new rules should be seen as a step to "integrate" the organization's operations within the Holy See and will reinforce Catholic advocacy on behalf of the poor, "because we will be able to speak in the name of the Church."