

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



NO. 101: NOVEMBER 5, 2014



REV. LARRY SNYDER is the president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA), the national office of more than 160 local Catholic Charities agencies nationwide. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the role of Catholic Charities in the nation's social safety net at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: I wanted to start with the first thing people might see about your organization: its name, Catholic Charities. The term “charity” has had an interesting history, and in the contemporary era it is in some tension with the term “justice.” I wonder if you might start by reflecting on how your organization sees the concept of charity in relation to justice in the kind of work that you do.

SNYDER: We have had an evolution in our appreciation of the word “charity.” When we were first founded, everybody was called “Catholic Charities.” Then in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, “charity” got a bad rap from those who claimed it was demeaning to people—the idea that you’re giving them charity. A lot of Catholic charities then changed their names to, for example, Catholic Social Services and Catholic Family Services. That was the mode until the 1990s or so. But then people went back to the word “charity”—to its biblical sense of being one of the theological virtues, in fact the greatest theological virtue. If you read the Gospel of John, which says that “God is love,” it’s originally “*deus est caritas*”—“God is charity.” Now charities who had changed their name are going back to “Catholic Charities.” That’s an interesting evolution in our thought, which says to me that we’re now concentrating much more on the theological meaning and under-

standing of *caritas*, rather than simply on what the English translation might be.

You bring up this distinction between charity and justice, which is interesting because there’s been an evolution in the Church’s thought here as well. With



the evolution of Catholic social thought, beginning with Pope Leo XIII and *Rerum Novarum*, there has certainly been a real focus on justice in society. I believe it was Pope Benedict who said charity begins where justice leaves off; you can’t say you’re giving charity if you have not first ensured that there is justice in the relationship. So I don’t think there’s a tension at all between the two. In fact, we talk about the two feet of the disciple—

one is charity, one is justice, and we have to work for both.

An interesting thing about Catholic Charities is that when we were founded as a national organization in 1910, our charter called for us to be the attorney for the poor. That’s a great image for us, and it’s one that we’ve taken seriously. The idea is that you cannot have charity in isolation of the living or social situation of people, and therefore you have to advocate as well as serve, and be the voice for those who have no voice. That is all wound up within the concept of justice.

OWENS: You mentioned that for some period of time there was a trend in naming away from the term “charity” and towards speaking about social services. That brings up the question, then, of what distinguishes Catholic Charities from other forms of social services that are advocates for the poor. What is it that you do that’s different, and in what ways is it different?

SNYDER: I think the difference is apparent in a couple of ways. It’s in the work we do, because if you look at the work of Catholic Charities as part of the social safety net system, we tend to focus more on the people who have the biggest challenges. The people we deal with are frequently dealing with generational poverty—not situational poverty, where it’s

kind of an easy fix. In some ways, then, we're a corrective to the government, because we pick up the slack of the people that the government does not address.

The difference, though, is not only in what we do, but in how we do it. That's the critical thing: we don't serve people because they are Catholic, we serve people because *we* are Catholic. In other words, if we're really taking the demands of our religion seriously, we don't have a choice. We have to serve. Still, we do it in a way that does not proselytize. I think we evangelize by our actions, accepting people and spreading this message of the love of Christ—being the hands of Christ, the words of Christ. Part of that is respecting people, accepting them where they are.

So if you were asking what makes us different from a purely humanitarian social service agency, it would be our motivation—and hopefully, then, that motivation gets played out in the way that we provide services as well.

OWENS: You mentioned that in some way you serve as a corrective to the government. What is the most effective relationship between the Church, the academy and the government? I know that your organization has worked with places like the University of Notre Dame to consider the outcomes of poverty reduction programs and to understand whether what you're doing actually works. Can you say a bit about the relationship, to understand where you see yourself in the ecosystem? Certainly some might argue that much of what you're doing should be done by the government, and others would argue that it's absolutely the opposite.

SNYDER: As far as the academy goes, I've always said that what we need are "pracademics." We have practitioners like us who are doing the work, and then we have academics who are trying to find out what the best solutions are, and frequently we don't talk to each other. The best scenario would be if we could have

"pracademics," so that the practitioners interacted with the academics. We have pursued that, as you said, particularly with the University of Notre Dame, and that's been a good marriage, but we have worked with others as well. I think there's a definite benefit from the two different missions coming together like that.

When it comes to government, it's a somewhat different question. To me, it really is a convergence of mission there as well, but you do get some disagreement

“We don't serve people because they are Catholic, we serve people because *we* are Catholic. If we're really taking the demands of our religion seriously, we don't have a choice.”

about the proper role of government. Many people in Washington right now would say that the role of government is simply national security and civil order. That is the role of the government, to be sure, but in our tradition we would say that the role is much broader than that—that it is the working for the common good, especially for those who are most challenged or who are left out.

When you look at the mission of the charitable organizations of the Church, you see that that's what we're supposed to do as well. There is a convergence of mission, and in our history in the United

States, that has developed so that nonprofits work with government. Primarily, government gives the resources that we need, because they are the only entity that has the resources adequate to the task that's before us.

Sometimes people will ask me why we are working with government, and they don't understand that it goes back to the very beginning of the United States. It began on a local level, but in 1871 the federal government gave its first grant to a nonprofit, which happened to be the Little Sisters of the Poor. They got the first federal grant ever, because the government recognized that the Sisters were doing incredible work with the elderly poor in Washington. Rather than come in and try to take over that work, the government decided it could partner with the Sisters and bring the necessary resources to the table.

That relationship grew and grew. Today, when you look at the overall budget of Catholic Charities in this country, it's about \$4.3 billion every year, and 60 percent of that comes from the government. We take very seriously our need to be in the public square, and if you're in the public square, you have to deal with government—and not just on resource issues, but licensing issues, standards of care, all of that. We look at it as a give and take. When people say to me that the government is just telling us what to do, I go back to the fact that these are contracts that we have, and that both parties have to agree. You don't force one end.

The danger for us as nonprofits is in chasing the money rather than being true to our mission. You have to be very careful about that. The fact remains, though, that there is a convergence of mission, and frequently those resources are exactly what you need to do the particular work that you want to do.

OWENS: You have served personally on the advisory board for the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Of course, much of the

hullabaloo around that office is centered around issues like contraception and the health care mandate. Setting those big things aside, though, how has the working relationship been there with regard to social services of the sort that your organization focuses on?

SNYDER: I think that office has been a real gift. It was founded under George W. Bush, but then expanded under President Obama, and it has really leveled the playing field for us. Previously, because of the bureaucracy of the government, things were often stacked against faith-based nonprofits. What that office has done is given us the ability to have a voice—somebody who's going to go and take our message and work with it. I think it's been a hugely positive thing.

As far as the taskforce that you talked about, it was interesting because there were twenty-five of us, about eighteen of whom were religious people. There were a couple agnostics on that committee who felt that there should be total separation of church and state and that no faith-based organization should get any money. Those were really interesting discussions and I was very appreciative of the fact that every opinion was presented around the table and we had to work things out. In the end, during the two-year period of the task force that began in our tenure, we made something like seventy recommendations about how to improve social service delivery in the government, and I think fifty of them were actually accepted.

OWENS: As I understand it, you began your tenure at Catholic Charities USA right about the time that an enormous hurricane rolled through New Orleans and created the greatest humanitarian disaster on American soil in many decades. Can you tell us what that experience taught you, and how Catholic Charities performed during that period?

SNYDER: It was a decisive event for us. We had been involved in disaster-response since the 1960s, but primarily



that consisted of the national office simply giving out grants. Our local agencies would respond on the ground, and they would submit requests to the national office for funding, and we would review them and send out the money. I had been head of the disaster response committee for a few years, so I fortunately knew how the system worked. But with Katrina, as you said, we had never before had a disaster of that scale in this country, where we had a major city evacuated and a million people displaced. All of a sudden everybody in our office became a disaster worker. It was clear to me that we couldn't just sit by and give out grants. So we mobilized ourselves, went down and actually took a very active part in putting Catholic Charities around the disaster response table. We weren't a major player before that.

I was very impressed with how the Catholic Charities network across the country stepped up and sent goods and whatever people needed. Financially, I think we ended up with \$160 million in response to Katrina, and we've never matched that. Aside from the money, local agencies also sent social workers down to help. There was just no way our local New Orleans agencies could have handled it alone, since they themselves were dealing with their family needs. Eventually we had this great rotation that was set up; we

started building a real disaster response mechanism across this country to the point where today Catholic Charities falls behind only the Red Cross and the Salvation Army in the disaster work that we do. What we have really concentrated on in the last four or five years is preparation and readiness. Now I think we have an incredible system and it's a big part of what we do, and all of that was triggered by one disaster.

OWENS: Pope Francis's papacy has been transformative in many ways, not least of which has been its consistent attention to the poor and acts of mercy and justice. I wonder if you might reflect a bit on what you see as the impact of this papacy on the work that you do at Catholic Charities USA.

SNYDER: For me, the most amazing thing that Pope Francis has done is to once again refocus us on the fact that we are a church called to be on mission. Everything seems to focus on mission for the Holy Father, which of course is what motivates somebody who's working at Catholic Charities. We hadn't heard that for a while. It has been something that has really reinvigorated and re-inspired everyone. The pope talks about the church being a field hospital, and that's an image that we can certainly relate to. He talks, too, about the Catholic Church


being involved in the messiness of life. If you go back to the “Cadre Report,” which was the Catholic Charities’ guiding document from the 1960s, one of the points made there is that our work is to be about the messiness of life, and to understand that there’s something very sacramental about that. God is very much present in all of this, present in what appears to be dysfunction in people’s lives. What we’re hearing is the Holy Father validating that, and I think what he has done for charitable organizations in the Church has been amazing.

[END]

**The Boisi Center for Religion
& American Public Life**

24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

www.bc.edu/boisi
617-552-1860
publife@bc.edu

 [boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)

 [@boisi_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center)

Visit bc.edu/boisi-resources for a complete set of the Boisi Center Interviews and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.