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Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, speaks at a news conference for the release of Pope Francis' message for the Jan. 1 celebration of World Peace Day at the Vatican Dec. 16, 2022. (CNS photo/Cindy Wooden)

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Rome — May 12, 2023

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A top Vatican cardinal defended Pope Francis' "drastic" leadership firings at the Holy See's preeminent charity, saying May 12 they were necessary for the wellbeing of staff at Caritas Internationalis and not a condemnation of its work.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, whose development office is responsible for Caritas, sought to explain Francis' extraordinary decision in November [to fire the elected Caritas leadership](#), appoint a temporary administrator and overhaul the Caritas statutes. The move shocked Caritas, which is one of the most visible aid groups around the world, and was the latest display of Francis' willingness to wield the absolute power of the papacy when he feels it's necessary.

Czerny didn't beat around the bush as he addressed a weeklong meeting in Rome of the global confederation of 162 national Caritas national chapters, the first since Francis' intervention. The assembly will end May 16 with a new leadership team voted into office.

"I am sure that all of you were surprised and disturbed by this," Czerny told the audience, according to his prepared remarks. "The appointment of a temporary administrator was an act of love and care, not a denunciation ... It was a necessary call to repair and fine-tune a body that is essential for the whole church."

In November, Francis fired Caritas secretary-general Aloysius John, its president, Filipino Cardinal Antonio Tagle; Tagle's vice presidents, the treasurer and ecclesiastic assistant after an outside investigation found "real deficiencies" in management that had affected staff morale at the Caritas secretariat in Rome.

There was no evidence of financial wrongdoing or sexual misconduct. But former employees described a toxic workplace environment under John, where staffers were bullied, harassed and humiliated. Several quit, giving up sought-after, income tax-free Vatican employment rather than remain in abusive conditions.

On the eve of the Caritas assembly to elect new leaders, John penned a devastating open letter to the Caritas representatives, [blasting Czerny's office for a "brutal power grab"](#) and casting his ouster in racial terms. John, a French citizen of Indian descent, said the wealthier donor countries from the "North" had never wanted a Caritas secretary general from the "South" and wanted to impose their will on the confederation, according to a copy of the letter obtained by The Associated Press.

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Czerny insisted that the firings were both necessary and appropriate and were by no means a criticism of Caritas or its work providing emergency aid and development assistance to the neediest around the globe.

The investigation that grew out of the personnel complaints "revealed patterns of workplace relationships and processes that prevented the general secretariat from operating properly; furthermore, they undermined the wellbeing of staff. They put the operations, name and reputation at risk, not only of Caritas Internationalis but of all Caritas'," Czerny said.