

Catholic aid agencies must give workers spiritual formation

VATICAN CITY – Catholic aid agencies must offer their workers continual spiritual formation so those in need can witness God’s merciful love, Pope Benedict XVI said.

While professional training and technical expertise are important, a “formation of the heart” is indispensable for those who work for church-based charities, he told members of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum in a Feb. 29 audience.

The kind of help the church offers humanity “must never be reduced to mere philanthropy, but must be a tangible expression of evangelical love,” he said.

Cor Unum, the Vatican agency that promotes and coordinates Catholic charitable giving, held its plenary assembly in Rome and focused on the theme of “Human and Spiritual Qualities of People Who Work in the Church’s Charitable Organizations.”

At the papal audience, the council’s president, Cardinal Paul Cordes, thanked the pope for his 2005 encyclical, “Deus Caritas Est” (“God Is Love”), which he said “represents a milestone for Catholic charitable organizations.”

Dedicating oneself to helping others “is a unique occasion for human and also spiritual growth,” the cardinal said.

The pope said he wanted to dedicate the first encyclical of his pontificate to the theme of charity, which he said is “valuable for the church.”

It is through its charitable activity that the church concretely makes itself present to all those who suffer or find themselves in difficulty, he said.

“Charitable activity occupies a central position in the evangelizing mission of the church,” Pope Benedict said. “We must not forget that works of charity represent a key opportunity for meeting people who do not yet know Christ or who have only partial knowledge of him,” he said.

That is why church-based charities should be concerned with their workers’ “human,

professional and theological-spiritual formation,” he said.

“Those who work in the church’s many forms of charitable activity cannot then content themselves with just offering technical help or solving practical problems and difficulties,” the pope said.

When people are suffering or in pain, they need to be met with a loving, merciful approach, he said. Close spiritual formation helps workers take on the “same feelings of merciful love that God has for every human being,” he said.

The pope said he was pleased that Cor Unum was holding a spiritual retreat in Guadalajara, Mexico, in June for the heads of Catholic charities in the Americas.

“This will serve to fully recover the human and Christian dimension” of their work, he said, adding that he hoped other regions would hold similar retreats in the future.