

Vatican defends work of missionary body in face of Italian scandal

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican defended the wide-ranging work throughout the world of its missionary arm, which has come under scrutiny in an Italian investigation into a public works corruption scandal.

A Vatican statement June 28 said recent news stories about the alleged involvement of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in the probe had prompted the need to “recall some objective facts to protect the good reputation of this important body of the Holy See and the Catholic Church.”

Managing the significant financial and real estate patrimony of the congregation, the statement said, requires expert advice and there exists the possibility of “exposure to errors in judgment and fluctuation in international markets.”

The statement did not mention Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, archbishop of Naples and former head of the congregation, who has been formally placed under investigation by Italian judicial authorities. Italian newspapers speculated that the cardinal sold property below market value to a government minister, who then allocated public funds for work on the Vatican building housing the congregation. There are also questions about how the cardinal helped a government official - now under investigation - find an apartment.

Cardinal Sepe said at a news conference June 21 that all of his actions as prefect of the congregation from 2001 to 2006 were carried out in full transparency and with the good of the church in mind.

The Vatican statement listed the many tasks assigned to the congregation, including sustaining young churches throughout the world; the formation of local clergy, catechists and pastoral workers; and the construction of new churches, schools, hospitals and other structures in poor parts of the world.

The costs of these works, the statement said, “is a great deal less than those of any other international organization involved in aid work.”

The congregation also directly supports the Pontifical Urbanian University in Rome, other colleges and many dioceses, according to the statement.

All of this requires financing, most of which comes from donations connected with World Missionary Day, the statement said. However, it said, the congregation also relies on income generated from the rent or sale of its real estate patrimony, much of which is found in Rome.

Italian newspapers have said that the congregation owns a vast network of apartments, villas and land, much of it left to the church in the wills of the faithful.

The Vatican and Cardinal Sepe himself have said that he will cooperate fully with the investigation within the rules of protocol between the Holy See and Italy.