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Cincinnati bishop among sponsors to pull support from women's conference

by Joshua J. McElwee



Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr (CNS photo)

Reacting to complaints by antiabortion activists that a keynote speaker at a "violence against women" conference was pro-choice, Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr and other sponsors this month withdrew support for the gathering, planned in part by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati.

Their actions forced organizers to rescind an invitation to Charlotte Bunch, founding director and senior scholar of the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in New Jersey and a consultant to the United Nations. She was replaced at the April 24 gathering by Charity Sr. Caroljean Willie, the order's U.N. representative.

Charity Sr. Patricia A. Cruise, president of Cincinnati's Seton High School, where the gathering was held, had also notified conference organizers that they would need to change venues were Bunch to be kept on the program.

After the invitation to Bunch was rescinded, the conference went on at the high school as planned. However, despite the speaker change, the archdiocese refused to renew its support.

The conference, more than two years in planning, had received support from more than two dozen organizations, including three archdiocesan offices. It was coordinated with the help of the Cincinnati Sisters of Charity's Office of Peace, Justice & Integrity of Creation.

After hearing of the complaints, Schnurr expressed his objections in an April 19 communication to organizers, saying that "the keynote presenter" advocates for positions contrary to Catholic church teaching, including the right to abortion.

"To avoid any perception that the archdiocese or any of its individual offices approve of Ms. Bunch's positions, these offices withdrew all association with this conference," his letter stated.

Other sponsors, including SC Ministry Foundation, a funding source run by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, also expressed objections once they became aware of Bunch's views on abortion.

Bunch was to be a highlight of the daylong conference, which featured 12 seminars on topics such as human trafficking, women and homelessness, and violence against women.

Explaining her decision in an April 20 letter, Cruise wrote that Bunch "advocates and supports practices and positions that are contrary to teachings of the Catholic church." She went on to say that she regretted that she "did not know this sooner, but in light of this information" the decision has been made that Ms. Charlotte Bunch will not be speaking at Seton High School.

More than 150 people attended the conference, which went on without Bunch. In a statement she released April 26, Bunch, who is also a professor in the department of women's and gender studies at Rutgers, tied her removal from the event to the conference theme: violence against women.

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"It is ironic that a conference about violence against women is marred by violence against the women organizing it and against a female speaker," wrote Bunch. "Let me be clear that threatening to close down this event if I spoke is an act of violence against women itself — an act of suppression and disrespect to the planning the organizers invested in preparation, as well as a denial of my fundamental freedom of speech."

In the wake of the conference, the Sisters of Charity April 28 issued its own statement, explaining the sequence of events: "Five days before the conference, the archdiocese of Cincinnati, Seton High School and the co-chairs of the planning committee heard from "right to life" individuals who were concerned that the key note speaker of the conference was pro-choice."

"As a result of these concerns the archdiocese of Cincinnati withdrew the sponsorship of three of its offices. " Seton High School, the site of the conference, required the planning committee to contract with an alternative keynote speaker or the conference could not be held at Seton.

"The planning committee believed that this [Bunch's abortion views] was extraneous to the focus of the conference." But "in light of the short notice and the difficulty of negotiating a new venue, the planning committee reluctantly decided to withdraw the invitation to Ms. Bunch."

With the withdrawal of Bunch's invitation, organizers were able to host the event as planned with Willie as the new keynote speaker. However, they were not able to gain back the support of the archdiocese.

According to the archdiocesan statement, its offices did not renew their support ?because of a lack of time to become adequately informed about other participants.?

[This article was updated April 30th to reflect the fact that Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr was not the only sponsor of the conference to initially express objection over the choice to have Bunch speak at the gathering. A number of sponsors, once informed of her views on abortion, expressed objections along with the archbishop.]

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