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10 dioceses quit bishops' antipoverty campaign

Jerry Filteau | Jul. 7, 2010

At Dolores Mission Parish in Los Angeles, children walk home from school in safety accompanied by volunteers from Comunidad en Movimiento. The group has been a grant recipient of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. (CNS/CCHD/Peter Howard)

Analysis

WASHINGTON -- At least 10 U.S. bishops have decided within the past year to suspend or drop their annual collection for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in their dioceses, and another is withholding funds at least for now.

Bishop Bernard Hebda of Gaylord, Mich., said in June that he has decided to delay sending the diocese?s annual donation to the campaign until a review of its grant practices is completed. The U.S. bishops? subcommittee on the campaign is currently reviewing funding practices and gave a preliminary report to the bishops? Administrative Committee in March.

Several of the bishops who have decided to suspend or drop the collection cited concerns about some grant recipients. Some recipients have had to return grants when church officials learned they were directly involved in some activity not in accord with Catholic moral and social teaching. Grant recipients are required to certify that they do not engage in any such activities.

John Carr, executive director of the U.S. bishops? Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, which includes the campaign, said, ?There?s a serious review and renewal of CCHD under way, and our hope is that it will strengthen CCHD, keep faith with its foundations, and respond to some of the concerns.?

He told *NCR* he hopes the renewal ?will maintain the fundamentals of CCHD, but see how it can work better.?

Some bishops who have dropped out of the collection said they did so only because of significantly increased local needs that their own parish and diocesan social service agencies face as the nation continues to suffer from high unemployment, foreclosures and other continuing effects of the recession.

Dioceses that have already stopped participating in the Catholic Campaign for Human Development collection or announced plans to do stop doing so are: Allentown, Altoona-Johnstown, Greensburg and Harrisburg, Pa.; Green Bay and Madison, Wis.; Lincoln, Neb.; Birmingham, Ala.; St. Augustine, Fla.; and Tulsa, Okla.

All four Pennsylvania dioceses are shifting the collection to a purely local one for Catholic Charities or other social services in the wake of a 2009 state budget crisis that left state social spending slashed, forcing Catholic Charities and other private nonprofits to try to pick up the slack on their own.

The formula for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development collection is that one-fourth of it stays in the diocese to be administered locally, while three-fourths goes to the national office. All grants given from the national portion must also be approved by the local bishop where the recipient organization is located.

The campaign was established by the U.S. bishops in 1970 as a domestic antipoverty program. It is funded by an annual parish collection, taken up in most dioceses on Christ the King Sunday in November.

When Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt of Greensburg announced his decision to drop out April 22, he cited concern that some grantees fail to follow church teachings. The other three bishops focused only on the increased local needs.

Allentown diocesan spokesman Matthew T. Kerr told *NCR* that the new bishop, Bishop John O. Barres, decided in reviewing diocesan collections and finances that starting this year he would switch the campaign collection to ?a local collection? that will help meet social service needs within the diocese. He said he did not hear of any concern by the bishop about the nature of campaign?s grants.

Harrisburg diocesan spokesman Joseph A. Aponick said the combination of increased demand for social services and the state cuts in funding hit diocesan agencies hard.

He added that concern about some Catholic Campaign for Human Development grants ?certainly was talked about, but the primary concern was to better serve local needs.?

Peter A. Biasucci, assistant executive director of Harrisburg diocesan Catholic Charities, told *NCR* that while a diocesan committee is still working on funding criteria and other details, the basic plan is to leave 10 percent of each parish?s collection in the parish and send 90 percent to the diocese.

Altoona-Johnstown diocesan spokesman Tony DeGol also cited last year?s state budget crisis and the toll it took on Catholic Charities as the reason Bishop Joseph V. Adamec was switching the recipient of this fall?s collection from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to Catholic Charities. He said the decision was made last fall but could not be implemented immediately because envelopes for the 2009 special collection, already in parishioners? hands, designated the campaign as the recipient.

In any discussions of the change that he was party to, concern about grants ?was not a factor,? DeGol said.

In Green Bay, however, such a concern was expressed when the diocese announced in February that it would not include the campaign in its annual Lenten collection, The World?s Poor. The collection has traditionally been divided three ways: Peter?s Pence, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

The Compass, the Green Bay diocesan newspaper, quoted Fr. John Doerfler, vicar general, saying, ?There have been some questions about programs that have received funding from CCHD. That, along with the enormous post-earthquake needs in Haiti, we decided this is an appropriate time to give additional support to Catholic Relief Services while we analyze the situation with CCHD.?

St. Augustine?s Bishop Victor Galeone criticized campaign policies in an announcement last November that he was replacing the campaign collection that month with a ?Diocesan Schools and Social Action Appeal.?

Bishop Robert J. Baker of Birmingham simply informed Catholics that the collection would go to the church in Latin America. He asked people to cross the campaign name off their collection envelopes and write in ?Church in Latin America.?

Beginning this year, Baker is replacing the annual collection for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development with a locally oriented Beacons of Hope collection "to save our center-city schools." (See related story: **Why one bishop dropped out of CCHD** [1].

LifeSiteNews, an Internet news service focusing on pro-life and family issues, has reported that the bishops of Lincoln, Madison and Tulsa specifically cited concern over grant recipients in their decision not to take up the collection.

In the past there have been other occasional diocesan dropouts from the collection. Joliet, Ill., for example, once dropped out for a couple of years to concentrate on local programs. About a decade after the campaign started the then-bishop of Allentown stopped the collection in his diocese because the bishops? original stated campaign goal of $50 million had been met. Allentown did not rejoin the campaign until after it got a new bishop several years later.

This is the first time, however, that a significant number of dioceses -- 5 percent of the 195 dioceses and eparchies in the United States -- have left the campaign in a single time frame.

For many years critics of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development have sought to discredit it by claiming some of its funding supports Marxist or communist-oriented groups, or organizations that back abortion, artificial birth control or other practices that go against Catholic moral or social teaching.

Since last fall such criticisms reached a new peak as Texas-based Bellarmine Veritas Ministry released a series of reports alleging abortion and same-sex-marriage advocacy by some grant recipients.

A new coalition formed last year, called Reform CCHD Now -- led chiefly by the Bellarmine group, the American Life League and politically conservative Catholic layman Deal Hudson?s Catholic Advocate. The group?s Web site (www.reformcchdnow.com) carries investigative reports and critiques of the campaign by its members and posts various news reports and commentary on the controversy. The coalition urges Catholics to boycott the campaign collection.

Last October Bishop Roger P. Morin of Biloxi, Miss., chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops? subcommittee for the campaign, wrote to the bishops that it found Bellarmine reports on three grant recipients to be accurate. He said one had already been defunded as a result of campaign oversight.

Morin said the other two -- both immigrant worker rights organizations in San Francisco -- had recently put out voter guides that took a stand in opposition to church teaching by supporting legalization of same-sex marriage and, in one case, opposing parental notification before a minor could have an abortion. ?As soon as these facts were confirmed, and in consultation with the local archdiocese, the groups were also defunded,? he said.

In other cases, the campaign found the investigative reports had condemned a grantee on grounds of guilt by association: The grantee was not directly engaged in any activities contrary to Catholic teaching, but it had entered into a number of coalitions with other community-organizing groups, and one or another of those other groups had started or joined a campaign promoting a position contrary to Catholic teaching. In some cases, when the grantee learned of the coalition partner?s stance, it left the coalition or issued a disclaimer dissociating itself from that position.

One of the sharper episcopal criticisms of the campaign came in November from Bishop Victor Galeone of St. Augustine, Fla., who cited three reasons for abandoning the campaign:

- Over the years it has at times given grants to ?certain organizations hostile to key Catholic positions.?
- ?Catholic organizations or groups cannot receive CCHD funds since their guidelines exclude all ?organizations controlled by governmental, educational or ecclesiastical bodies? ? -- meaning that inner-city Catholic schools are among organizations excluded from funding.
- ?No funds [are] earmarked to address the greatest cause of poverty in our country today -- single motherhood.?

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development offers two kinds of grants: community organizing and economic development. Its criteria for grants, which include that all activities must be in accord with Catholic moral and social teaching, can be found on its Web site, www.usccb.org/cchd/grants.

Under the Catholic social principle of promoting meaningful participation of the poor in economic life, community-organizing grants require not only that the majority of those benefiting from a group?s efforts are the poor, but that ?people living in poverty must have the dominant voice in the organization. At least 50 percent of those who plan, implement and make policy, hire and fire staff (e.g., the board of directors, etc.) should be persons who are involuntarily poor.?

For economic development grants, the criteria say the majority of those who would benefit must be poor and ?at least one-third of those who plan, implement and make policy for the applicant organization (usually the board of directors) are low-income.?

That concern for vesting the poor themselves with majority or substantial decision-making is why projects controlled by government, ecclesiastical and educational bodies are not eligible for funding.

Morin noted in his October letter, however, that while not controlled by the church, the 250 campaign-funded groups the previous year involved ?683 Catholic priests, 776 Catholic parishes, 18 Catholic Charities agencies, 31 religious communities.?

?CCHD is deeply integrated into the life of the Catholic community,? he said.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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