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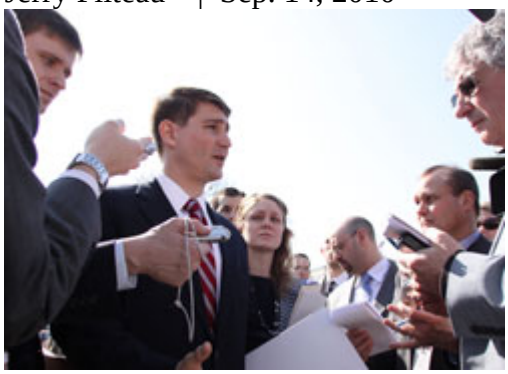
Progressives in the public square

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 14, 2010



Rep. John Boccieri, D-Ohio, tells reporters he will vote yes on the health care reform bill March 19 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP/Lauren Victoria Burke)

WASHINGTON -- Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good closed its office in Washington at the end of July and let its remaining paid staff go, but it plans to continue a scaled-back program.

Founded in 2005 after George W. Bush soundly beat John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election, it was one of three new Catholic organizations formed to spread the message of progressive Catholic social teaching that is fully pro-life, countering Republican efforts of recent years to lay claim to being the party that represents Catholic values.

The other two, Catholics United and Catholic Democrats, both more directly political than the alliance, say they are still going strong and expanding, but much of the alliance?s funding dried up this year.

?The money just wasn?t there? to keep the full operation going, said Jesuit Fr. William J. Byron of St. Joseph University in Philadelphia, a member of the alliance?s board of directors.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese, a senior fellow at Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University in Washington, said a major problem facing progressive Catholic groups in general is that ?they don?t have any money.?

?Catholic Republicans are willing to open their checkbooks and finance? conservative Catholic groups, he said, but there is no comparable support from the Democratic side for liberal Catholic organizations addressing public policy issues, and ?they are way underfunded.?

Fred Rotondaro, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and chairman of the Catholics in Alliance board, agreed that money problems forced the cutbacks but said the alliance will continue to operate ?at a reduced stage.?

He said that he is working on new fundraising and that in the meantime plans are under way to begin spreading the alliance?s message through Web postings and e-mail. ?We have a pretty good mailing list, about 40,000

people,? he said.

He added that since closing its original office, the alliance has obtained some shared office space on K Street in Washington and ?we will have staff. We will have at least a part-time office manager.? At one time the organization had at least half a dozen people on its staff.

The alliance was formed in 2005 -- as Rotondaro put it, ?right after the [2004] presidential election, when I think a number of progressive Catholics came to the belief that social justice ideas were not being very seriously considered by a lot of Catholics when they came to voting.?

Over the past five years, ?I think we did do a very good job of educating a great number of people, a great number of Catholics, about the fact that issues such as poverty, environmental issues, antiwar issues, were very, very important.? he said.

?Catholics in Alliance is a pro-life organization, but a lot of us are -- certainly I am -- very strongly in favor of the Cardinal Bernardin principle of the ?seamless garment,? ? he added, referring to the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin?s argument that Catholics must apply a ?consistent ethic of life? to the full array of issues that touch on human life and dignity.

He said the alliance may have suffered somewhat from its very success after Barack Obama was elected president. ?There?s a lot less enthusiasm right now [than there was when progressive Catholics felt shut out of the public debate]. In effect, we had a situation where ?we won and we don?t have to worry about things? -- well, unfortunately, you win but you?ve gotta keep pounding the pavement.?

Rotondaro said there are a number of good, experienced writers on Catholic social teachings on the alliance board or still connected to the organization in other ways. Within the next month or so, he said he hoped they would begin writing a series of ?roundtable postings? on the alliance Web site, www.catholicsinalliance.org, addressing ?themes of Catholic social justice principles and how they apply to public policy at this time.?

?What we want to do is go back to one of the first tenets of our organization, which was promotion of Catholic social justice principles,? he said.

The site has resource materials on some of those issues, but at the end of August it appeared that nothing new had been posted since June.

The alliance, unlike two other politically progressive Catholic groups that sprang up about the same time -- Catholics United and Catholic Democrats -- was formed under nonprofit rules that do not let it do partisan political campaigning or lobbying.

Yet it was credited with being instrumental in opening up a new public discussion of how Catholics could vote for politicians based on their entire record of positions on many issues of justice and human dignity -- including recognition of the pro-life stance of those who seek to reduce the number of abortions in the United States through social and economic programs even if they oppose outlawing it.

Among chief beneficiaries in this discussion have been Catholic Democratic politicians who are pro-life but do not believe it is possible or desirable to try to outlaw abortion in a pluralistic nation like the United States. Such pro-life Catholic Democrats in Congress played a key role in the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act earlier this year.

Several *NCR* sources said most of the funding for the alliance from the beginning had been given by or generated by Smith and Elizabeth Bagley. Smith Bagley, an R.J. Reynolds heir, entrepreneur, social activist, Washington socialite and Democratic fundraiser, died last January. His wife, Elizabeth, also a well-known social and political activist and former ambassador to Portugal, has been special representative for global partnerships under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton since June 2009. Rotondaro said he believes Bagley?s position as a State Department official prevents her from engaging in fundraising for outside groups such as the alliance.

While the alliance has been forced to scale back dramatically because of a lack of funding, the more clearly political groups, Catholics United and Catholic Democrats, have started gearing up for off-year elections this fall.

In July, Catholics United (www.catholics-united.org) announced a $500,000 campaign to retain the House seats of four pro-life Democrats who voted for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act -- Reps. Tom Perriello in Virginia, Kathy Dahlkemper in Pennsylvania, and Steve Driehaus and John Boccieri in Ohio.

?The campaign is going great,? said Chris Korzen, Catholics United executive director. He said the organization has campaign workers in all four congressional districts and has brought out local Catholics to offer a countervoice to the Susan B. Anthony List bus tour in Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania this August.

The Susan B. Anthony List (www.sba-list.org), whose political action committee devotes millions of dollars to electing pro-life women or pro-life men running against pro-choice women, has sought to portray pro-life politicians who voted for the health care reform legislation -- including Dahlkemper and Driehaus -- as former pro-lifers who have sold out to the pro-choice movement.

There is continuing disagreement whether the health reform act provides new federal funding for abortion or maintains the status quo, prohibiting all such funding except in cases of rape, incest or danger to the mother?s life.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops opposed the legislation on grounds that several of its provisions open the door to court decisions that would force more federal funding of abortion. Catholics United has on its Web site links to articles and analyses that say the legislation does not offer new federal funding of abortion and in fact includes provisions likely to reduce the number of abortions.

Catholic Democrats (www.catholicdemocrats.org) describes itself as ?advocating the ideals of Catholic social teaching and the Democratic Party.?

In 2008 it launched a Catholics for Obama Web site (www.catholicsforobama.org). The site offers for download a booklet, The Catholic Case for Obama, by the president of Catholic Democrats, Dr. Patrick Whelan of Harvard Medical School. (Whelan is a member of the NCR board of directors.)

Steven Krueger, Catholic Democrats? national director, said the organization so far has operated ?on a shoestring? as essentially an all-volunteer organization, but over the past two years it has built its base of supporters from 600 to 15,000.

In the meantime it has also built a track record of effectiveness in the public square as well as successes behind the scenes, he said, and ?now we?re ready to take the next step? of developing a paid staff.

?We have every reason to believe that we will be successful,? he said. ?There is a tremendous need for progressive Catholics to have their voices heard. ... Catholic social teaching has much to say? to U.S. policy

directions.

He said a fundraiser is planned this fall.

Stephen Schneck, a political science professor and director of The Catholic University of America?s Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies in Washington, said it is understandable that after a grueling battle like the health care reform in 2009-2010, the progressive Catholic organizations involved in that would feel ?a bit of activism fatigue? and step back to catch their breath.

The health care fight ?was a big effort -- it took something out of a lot of organizations,? he said.

?There has been a lull,? he said, but from what he has heard, those organizations are all gearing up for more activity as the elections draw near -- especially Catholics United, which he said has been ?very active for the last month or so? in support of key pro-life Democrats who are being painted as pro-choice because of their vote on health care reform.

On the financial side, Reese said the GOP has focused on courting Catholics since the 1980s and has put money out there to back the effort.

For example, the conservative, Republican-oriented Susan B. Anthony List plans to spend $6 million on midterm elections this fall.

By comparison, Catholics in Alliance, Catholics United and Catholic Democrats ?don?t have the money or the manpower to have much effect,? Reese said.

?We don?t have a Democratic Karl Rove [longtime Republican political strategist and deputy chief of staff under George W. Bush] who sees the importance of the Catholic vote for the Democratic Party and is willing to use his political muscle and his financial muscle to support a strategy that reaches out to Catholics,? Reese said.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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