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Catholic Worker groups part of faulty FBI probe

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Sep. 28, 2010

WASHINGTON -- A handful of Catholic Worker groups across the country were among the anti-war activists, environmentalists and animal-rights groups wrongly investigated by the FBI, according to a lengthy report released Sept. 20 by the Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General.

According to Inspector General Glenn Fine, there was "little or no basis" for the investigations.

The groups included the anti-war Thomas Merton Center in Pittsburgh, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Catholic Worker, Greenpeace, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and an individual Quaker peace activist.

Fine's office reviewed 8,000 pages of FBI documents from 2001 to 2006 related to these groups in its 191-page document: "A Review of the FBI's Investigations of Certain Domestic Advocacy Groups."

The FBI's investigation of nonviolent civil disobedience of some of these groups placed them under an "acts of terrorism" classification, which automatically put them under government watch lists.

The report concluded that these advocacy groups were not specifically targeted by the FBI, but that agents used inaccurate or insufficient reasons to open investigations and even after no basis to investigate a group was found, the agency kept the investigation open for several years.

In a letter to the inspector general, FBI Deputy Director Timothy Murphy said the bureau had not targeted any groups on the basis of their First Amendment activities but instead on concerns about potential criminal acts. He also said the FBI regretted that incorrect information had been provided.

Domestic terrorism investigations were opened against members of various Catholic Worker groups beginning in 2003 following incidents of vandalism and trespassing at military recruiting offices in Milwaukee; Ithaca, N.Y.; Norfolk, Va.; and Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Neb.

FBI agents also monitored rallies or events where protests or acts of civil disobedience might be expected; and recorded and retained data about Catholic Worker members obtained from other agencies.

The FBI classified "peaceful trespass on a military facility" and acts of vandalism, including the spilling of purported human blood, as potential acts of terrorism. According to the inspector general's report, acts that went beyond simple trespass to include destruction of government property could be classified acts of terrorism.

In a case of vandalism at a military recruitment center in Milwaukee, at least one member of the Casa Maria Catholic Worker community was investigated by the FBI for possible involvement.

Michael Komba, the unnamed Catholic Worker member in the report who was part of this FBI investigation, told Catholic News Service Sept. 23: "It was a little frightening to me to think I was labeled a terrorist when I

wasn't even involved (in the vandalism incident)."

When asked about the investigation into the activities of several Catholic Worker groups, he said: "Technically, Catholic Workers are more pacifists, but some do more activist work. I can see looking into it, but calling it a terrorist organization? That's (going) way too far."

He also said he was glad the Justice Department's report was issued because the "FBI needs to be held accountable." He said he was troubled by many other incidents of FBI investigations especially since 9/11.

That the Casa Maria Catholic Worker house was even mentioned in the report, he said, was "surprising."

"It was special in a weird way," he said, adding that it makes him "a little worried."

He said Casa Maria members are primarily involved in providing shelter to homeless women and refugee students, and distributing food and clothing in the city along with anti-war protests.

Another group mentioned in the report was the environmental activist organization Greenpeace. On its website the organization praised the Justice Department's report and was critical of the FBI's actions.

"Greenpeace appreciates the steps taken by the Office of the Inspector General to illuminate the nature of these improper investigations. But, it's troubling that the FBI has been targeting peaceful protest, when our government should be supporting public participation, dissent, and First Amendment rights," it said.

The American Civil Liberties Union said the new report proved the FBI "improperly spied on American activists involved in First Amendment-protected activities and mischaracterized nonviolent civil disobedience as terrorism."

"It is a very alarming report and (shows) incompetence and confusion within the FBI," said Michael Drohan, president of the board of directors of the Thomas Merton Center. Founded in 1972 by Catholics committed to social justice, the center today is ecumenical, he said.

"Instead of actually trying to help to keep the country safer by tracking down the real threats to security, they target peace activists," he told CNS Sept. 24.

The FBI monitored the center's activities and "falsified the records" about those events, according to Drohan, a Catholic who has been associated with the center for 25 years. He said the FBI's description of an anti-war leafleting event that at most involved five people, for example, became an anti-war action carried out by several people.

For the FBI "to have the audacity to associate us in any way with terrorism ... is very offensive," he added, especially because the center is "completely devoted to nonviolence," in keeping with the philosophy of its namesake, Trappist Father Thomas Merton.

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