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CCHD wants to woo back bishops who left campaign

Jerry Filteau | Oct. 28, 2010

Detail from an ad the U.S. bishops use to promote the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. (CNS)

WASHINGTON ? At Tuesday?s teleconference on strengthening the Catholic identity and mission of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a reporter asked CCHD officials if they intended any direct outreach to the several bishops who have abandoned the annual collection, ?to bring them back into the fold, so to speak??

?We will. And the contact will be personal and direct,? said Bishop Roger Morin of Biloxi, Miss., chairman of the bishops? subcommittee on the CCHD.

?This is not a program or activity that belongs to one bishop, or a cluster of bishops or dioceses. This is a USCCB [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops] program that was established by the bishops, and the urging of the bishops is that all of the dioceses take part in this important work of assisting the poor and [addressing] the issue of poverty in our country,? he said.

By NCR?s count the heads of at least 10 dioceses have said they will replace the CCHD collection with a local collection for other social or charitable purposes this year. (Most dioceses take up the collection in their parishes the Sunday before Thanksgiving ? Nov. 21 this year.)

Several of the bishops announced they were opting out during the peak of last year?s firestorm of criticisms on conservative Web and blog sites claiming that dozens of grant recipients were in conflict with basic church teachings in some of their activities or advocacy positions.

Allegations against five of last year?s 270 grantees were judged to be well-founded, and those organizations were de-funded.
Morin said that some of the bishops who publicly opted out ?in re[illegible]riticism? will not be taking up the collection this November.

?But with the report forthcoming and, I would say, with the strong endorsement and support of the Administrative Committee of the bishops? conference ? we are going to ask those bishops to reconsider the decision that they have made and to once again walk in step with the bishops? conference in carrying out this major initiative on the part of the church addressing poverty in America,? he said.

In response to another reporter?s question, Morin and John Carr, executive director of the USCCB Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, which includes the CCHD staff, acknowledged that CCHD should be doing a better job of telling the story of its successes.

Carr some of the CCHD-funded successes are ?dramatic and incredibly impressive, like San Antonio,? where Communities Organized for Public Service, organized in 1974 as a coalition of Catholic parishes in the city?s poorer Hispanic neighborhoods, has long been a significant civic force that has brought hundreds of millions of dollars into better schools, streets, housing and other infrastructure in poor neighborhoods that once had almost no voice in city affairs.

?Some of it is mundane, but very important,? Carr added. He said on a recent trip to Cincinnati, ?I asked the CCHD archdiocesan director if there had been any significant victories recently.

?And he said, ?Absolutely. There was a huge victory.? He said one of the groups that CCHD funds was able to persuade the mass transit board to change the route of a bus line so that it didn?t stop three-quarters of a mile from the mall -- so that the people who work in the mall and people who shop in the mall who don?t have a car, mostly low-income people, don?t have to walk in the rain, or walk three-quarters of a mile in order to carry out their work or do their shopping.?

He said in the Orlando, Fla., a member of one CCHD-funded group died in a fire -- because when the fire department arrived, there was no water in the fire hydrant.

?It turns out in Orlando there?s three different fire hydrant systems, and the one in the poor communities doesn?t work very well,? Carr said. ?So they worked to make sure that fire hydrants are inspected on a regular basis throughout the year? so that people in low-income communities don?t lose their lives because firemen can?t put out a fire.

?These are not big, dramatic, stop-the-presses sort of achievements, but they?re really important forms of institutional change for the people who live in Orlando and who live in Cincinnati,? he said.

Morin cited the CCHD help that the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, tomato pickers in Southern Florida, have received in their Campaign for Fair Food -- a campaign to get growers and their wholesale customers to add just a penny a pound to the price of tomatoes and pass that on to some 4,000 low-wage workers in the tomato fields. This is ?a small increase, but nevertheless it made a significant difference in the lives of the farmworkers,? he said.

?Years ago I recall a project in Plaquemines [civil] Parish, La., it was in a small place called Ironton, and it was the concerned citizens and fishermen of Plaquemines that were funded by CCHD to bring running water to that small village, not quite the size of a town. The civil parish, the county, had not seen fit to run the water line out to that area,? said Morin, who before he became a bishop was priest of the New Orleans Archdiocese, where Ironton is located.

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?Things that we take for granted are things that [low-income] people have been doing without for a long time ? housing, streets, public services. It just isn?t getting done until there is a unified voice of the local residents able to address public officials and ask for their just deserts,? he said.

With the many individual stories like that ?it?s very difficult to number them and name them, and perhaps we haven?t done as much as we should in terms of publicizing the good that has been accomplished,? he said.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

For more coverage of the U.S. bishops' statement on the Campaign for Human Development, see:

- Michael Sean Winters: Catholic identity demands the work the CCHD promotes [3].
- Jerry Filteau: Bishops defend Catholic Campaign for Human Development [4]
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