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Bishops play defense on anti-poverty initiative

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Nov. 10, 2010

As the nation's 200 or so Roman Catholic bishops prepare for their annual meeting in Baltimore next week (Nov. 15-18), the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has become yet another battlefield in what some Catholics lament is an increasingly polarized church.

For four decades, the U.S. Catholic bishops have maintained a nationwide program designed to help the poor lift themselves out of poverty. And for just as long, fierce critics have tried to kill it.

Proponents of the CCHD say it exemplifies Jesus' preference for the poor and downtrodden; opponents, including several bishops, say it funds left-wing activists, some of whom undermine church doctrine on homosexuality and abortion.

As the U.S. bishops' flagship anti-poverty program, the CCHD is funded through a special collection taken up each year on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Since 1970, the program has disbursed $290 million in grants, according to CCHD officials.

But the program's practices and guiding philosophy have been sharply attacked by conservatives armed with Internet-enhanced research, a sharp nose for malfeasance, and a deep apprehension for anything that sniffs of socialism.

At the bishops' meeting in Baltimore, CCHD officials will present a 15-page report that details reforms they say will bolster the program's Catholic identity. The new policies will also ensure that groups whose activities conflict with the church's stance on social issues do not receive funding, they said.

Last June, a coalition called Reform the CCHD Now sent a report to bishops in all 195 dioceses detailing accusations against nearly 50 groups that it says engaged in pursuits "antithetical to church teaching."

The CCHD acknowledged such errors at five of the 270 groups that received funding in 2009; a sixth group's contract was not renewed for the same reason, said John Carr, executive director of the bishops' social justice office. The other allegations were unfounded, he said.

"While there are relatively few (groups) that have crossed the line, that is a source of deep regret," said Bishop Roger Morin of Biloxi, Miss., who chairs the bishops' subcommittee on the CCHD. "Dozens of steps are being taken to make sure that will not happen again."

Those steps include revising grant contracts to clearly state positions, activities and relationships not permitted by the CCHD; strengthening prohibitions on partisan political activity; creating a review board; seeking more Catholic grantees; and hiring a moral theologian to help with complicated decisions.

The CCHD also pledged to develop more effective ways to monitor and respond to attacks from its critics.

The vast majority of CCHD grants went to programs such as one in San Antonio that has attracted more than $1 billion for public projects in low-income neighborhoods, according to the report. Such projects, the report implies, are endorsed by Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote in 2009 that the "institutional path" of charity is "no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly."

Morin said he hopes the reforms will woo back some of the 10 bishops who, according to the independent weekly National Catholic Reporter, have stopped CCHD collections in their diocese.

"We are going to ask those bishops to reconsider and to once again walk in step with the bishops' conference on this major initiative," Morin said.

Deal Hudson, who directs the conservative website Inside Catholic, said the CCHD's reforms might eliminate funding errors if they are doggedly implemented, but said a more systemic problem remains.

"The groups they are dealing with, community organizing groups, are 100 percent committed members of the political left. That's just a fact," said Hudson, a former adviser to the Republican National Committee and former President George W. Bush.

Hudson strongly denied that politics play any role in his concern about CCHD, but said leftist groups nearly always conflict with Catholic doctrine on issues like gay rights and abortion.

Other Catholics say the reforms do not address another fundamental question: Is the church, through CCHD, essentially outsourcing its social justice mission?

Michael Hichborn, a spokesman for Reform the CCHD Now, called the anti-poverty program "philosophically flawed right from the outset."

"It never addresses sin as the root cause of poverty, which means it never addresses Christ as a remedy," he said.

Ideological battles over CCHD are distant thunder to the often desperately needy people who benefit from the program, said Robert Gorman, executive director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux in Louisiana.

People in his diocese are more concerned with improving police protection in violent neighborhoods, preventing drowning deaths in local pools, and restoring the state's oil-slicked coastline, Gorman said.

"It's a red herring," Gorman said of the ideological battle over the CCHD. "It's a national agenda that is not of importance to people at the local level who are just trying to work their way out of poverty and keep their kids safe."

In other business in Baltimore, the bishops will also elect a new president and vice president of their national conference, and vote on an agreement with four Reformed churches to recognize each other's baptisms.

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