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McCarthyite Tactics Against CCHD

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 15, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the anti-poverty program sponsored by the U.S. bishops, released a report Oct. 26 to assure critics that ?No CCHD funds will go to groups whose actions conflict with fundamental Catholic social teaching.? Now CCHD critics are up in arms, charging that the same report that contains the pledge extols the work of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), which, critics claim, ?participates in promotion of abortion, homosexual ?rights?, and other issues in conflict with Catholic social and moral teaching.?

In a phone interview, Michael Hichborn, Director of Defend the Faith at the American Life League, told me that he only expected CCHD to live up to its own promises. Hichborn works with the group Reform CCHD Now, which issued a statement [1] on November 4, claiming CIW had ?partnered with several pro-abortion, pro-homosexual organizations.? It detailed several such partnerships, complete with links to the websites of the offending organizations. Deal Hudson called attention to Hichborn?s report in the pages of Inside Catholic [2]. He wrote that, ?This information was not that hard to find, according to the researchers. All it required was an Internet search of CIW, determining its membership in various coalitions, and reading the materials provided at the Web sites of those coalitions.?

Hichborn and Hudson both claim that the CIW?s membership in pro-abortion and pro-homosexual coalitions violates the letter and the spirit of the new CCHD guidelines. On ?Real Catholic TV,? commentator Michael Voris trumpeted the charges, adding that asking the CCHD to police itself was ?like putting Al Capone in charge of law enforcement.? Hudson told me in a phone interview that the issue is a simple one: ?Whatever is a non-negotiable teaching of the Church should not be subsidized by the USCCB.? Of course, the category ?non-negotiable? is drawn from the Republican Party playbook, not from Catholic social teaching.

I asked Hichborn how CIW had responded to the charges. He said that they had not called him back, but a spokesperson for CIW said his call came more than a week after he published his charges and sent them around the blogosphere. I asked Hudson, who is publisher of an on-line journal and therefore subject to the canons of journalism, what the CIW told him about these charges. He said that he had not spoken with anyone at the organization. ??We didn?t need to talk to them,? he told me. ?It was in black and white on their own website.?

So, what does the CIW website [3] indicate? An exhaustive search revels that nowhere does it mention anything about abortion or homosexual rights. But, even a quick search of the CIW website indicates something else. One section of the website features photos of CIW members [4]. CIW is made up of very poor, migrant workers, mostly Mexicans, Mayan Indians and Haitians, who work picking tomatoes and other agriculture. It is almost exclusively male. Pictures show the men working in the fields, or holding meetings in church halls, or sitting on the bunk beds in the trailers where they live close by the farms because most are too poor to be able to afford a car. Visually, at least, the CIW members do not fit the mind?s eye of radical pro-abortion advocates or LGBT activists.

What the CIW does is organize workers for their own betterment. Not just any workers, mind you. The migrant

farm workers in Florida are among the most poor and most marginalized in the country, often paid below the minimum wage, living in substandard housing, and subject to harassment by employers and indifference from the rest of society. CIW uses such time-honored forms of non-violent Christian witness as hunger strikes and long marches to call attention to their concerns. CIW has won awards for its anti-slavery efforts (You read that correctly ? slavery still exists), playing a critical role in a dozen prosecutions of illegal slavery rings. Last month, Archbishop Thomas Wenski praised the organization when it reached an agreement with the Pacific Tomato Growers for better working conditions. Speaking on behalf of the Florida Catholic Conference, Wenski said, ?We applaud the courage and commitment of all of the leaders in these two groups who forged this agreement, which we hope and pray will lead to sustained change and new social responsibility for the industry.?

Of course, if Hichborn and Hudson had taken the time to call CIW, before spreading their calumnies, rather than just visiting CIW?s website, they would have found out that the first organizational meeting was held at Our Lady of Guadalupe church. Bishop Nevins, now Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Venice, was one of CIW?s earliest supporters. ?Bishop Nevins celebrated Mass to break our 30-day fast with the Eucharist, marched with us in our March for Dignity, Dialogue, and a Living Wage, and celebrated his last Sunday Mass as Bishop with the farmworker community in Immokalee,? Lucas Benitez, one of CIW?s co-founders, told *NCR*. ?Today, we work closely with Bishop Dewane of the Diocese of Venice in our efforts and we are especially grateful for Bishop Dewane's leadership in addressing human trafficking and raising awareness in the Diocese about this grave offense to human dignity.?

Clearly, CIW is not, as the critics charge, an organization that promotes abortion or gay marriage. Brigitte Gynther, who coordinates media relations for the group, told me that she was ?surprised ? by the charges because to her knowledge CIW had never engaged in pro-abortion advocacy, still less advocated for gay marriage, a fact confirmed by co-founder Benitez and others. ?CIW is trying to take a very responsible approach to the issues they deal with,? Michael McCarron of the Florida Catholic Conference (FCC) told me. ?Those who want to attack CCHD have gotten ahead of themselves.? McCarron and the FCC have worked with CIW for over ten years and notes that the organization is officially affiliated with the Conference?s Farm Worker?s Justice Committee. ?I think somebody jumped the gun,? he says regarding the accusations.

The new CCHD guidelines, however, stipulate that no grantee can belong to any umbrella organization or coalition that has as part of its stated goals or purposes promotion of abortion or other policies in opposition to fundamental Church teaching. The critics charge that CIW belongs to several such coalitions. They note that CIW ?is a Partner with? the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative [5] (NESRI). The executive director of NESRI, Catherine Albisa, however, told me that ?CIW are not members of NESRI. We are not a member organization.? On the NESRI website, CIW is listed under the heading ?Allies? and the subheading ?Partners and Campaigns? but NESRI exists to help its allies promote their agenda, not the other way round. When the U.S. ?allied? itself with the Soviet Union, no one believed the alliance suggested any approval of everything the Soviets did.

Ms. Albisa, who also was never contacted by either Hichborn or Hudson, told me, ?Our work [with CIW] involves researching labor and other issues, providing advice on implementing the human rights agreements, and reaching out to the human rights community to increase support for the Fair Food Campaign. It is abundantly clear what this work is about, and what the CIW is about.? NESRI helps a variety of organizations, some of which support women?s rights and others which support gay rights, but no one they help is expected to support all the positions of other organizations NESRI assists. Albisi said it was ?unconscionable? that ?any individual or group would attack them [CIW] for their own purposes and agenda having nothing to do with the abuses those workers face.?

Another target of the critics is the United States Human Rights Network [6](USHRN). Their website clearly lists CIW as a member. Also listed as members are groups that are explicitly devoted to gay marriage and

abortion rights. But, the USHRN website lists the organization?s ?Core Principles & Goals? and neither abortion nor gay marriage is listed there. It is clear from an examination of their activities that many people, with varying agendas, come to USHRN and the organization helps them filter their particular concerns through the lens of human rights law and policy.

The document produced by Hichborn links to several items on the USHRN webpage that the critics believe show the organization is pro-homosexual rights. The first link goes to a podcast by a transgender activist, Pauline Park, which may add a sense of titillation for a fundraising appeal by Hichborn?s group, but Ms. Park is not an employee nor a board member of USHRN. The podcast includes all sorts of academic-sounding gibberish about the ?sex-gender binary? and ?biological essentialism? and other jargon. It may be foolish. It may be wrong. But, it is not in any way, shape or form, indicative of the core principles, agenda, or goals of the organization. Mr. Hudson, on his website, has linked to articles I have written but that does not mean he endorses me or my positions.

A second link goes to a report produced by about an entirely distinct organization, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. The report contains some statements that could be considered controversial, but they are not statements made by USHRN. The third link sends one to the ?Response to Periodic Report of the United States to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,? which addresses employment non-discrimination for gay workers, an issue on which the USCCB has not taken a formal position, except raise a series of questions and to point out the need for strong religious exemptions. There is nothing, repeat nothing, about gay marriage in this report. One has the suspicion that Hichborn thinks it is enough to wave the initials LGBT in front of his audience, as if he were playing out some horrible psychological wound deriving from a particularly difficult game of Scrabble.

Of course, for Hichborn?s and Hudson?s audiences, waving the anti-gay flag is guaranteed to achieve one thing: Cash. On background, several people involved in this controversy offered the opinion that the whole fracas was about fundraising. Gay-bashing has long been one of the most effective fundraising tools on the right. Think Anita Bryant, Jerry Falwell, and the Family Research Council.

I asked Hudson and Hichborn if their concern to avoid funding organizations that have any relationship to pro-abortion groups extended to inter-religious dialogue. After all, members of the hierarchy and their staffs routinely meet with Reform Jews and liberal Episcopalians on matters of mutual concern. Some one buys the coffee, pays for the hall where the meetings are held, hires and pays the staff that oversees such inter-religious relations. ?The stated purpose is to be in dialogue, which is a good thing,? Hudson told me. But, he did not see how such inter-religious dialogue was exactly analogous to CIW?s situation. Hichborn was more explicit and defiant: ?There is no way the Catholic Church should be funding its own enemies.? Strictly speaking, of course, the Church does not have enemies, only those she must love the more. Some may believe the Church is their enemy, but Christians are called explicitly, and on the best authority, to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors.

The greatest irony here is that the CIW is not currently a CCHD grantee at all. But, even if it were, CIW is not, as the critics assert, an organization that ?participates in promotion of abortion? or gay marriage. Nor, based on the evidence the critics present, do the coalitions to which CIW belongs violate the norms set down by the CCHD report. ?It?s guilt by association,? said McCarron of the FCC. It is actually something worse than that. On behalf of their own ideological agenda, Mr. Hichborn and Mr. Hudson have dragged the reputation of a group of people who are doing the Lord?s work through the mud. Mr. Hudson claims that the pro-abortion stance of CIW was ?in black and white on their own website,? but it actually was not. The calumny of Hudson?s and Hichborn?s charges, however, is in black and white on their websites. Maybe when they collect the checks this attack brings in, they can print their charges in color. But, the charges will still be false.

The witch-hunt world that Hichborn and Hudson wish to create is a frightening prospect. You can print absurdities about an organization without bothering to call them. You can insinuate all manner of evil-doing based on the resume of someone who helps them. You can find yourself condemned because a link on your website goes to a link on someone else?s website which leads to another link on another website where, fourteen pages down, you find someone who supports abortion. If he were alive today, I am sure Senator Joseph McCarthy would applaud Hichborn and Hudson for perfecting his techniques.

The witch-hunt world is not just pernicious, it is also absurd. Follow the logic and apply it to a different situation. President Obama, of course, is pro-choice. And he has dispatched an ambassador to the Holy See. Pope Benedict XVI received the ambassador. In Hudson and Hichborn?s world, Pope Benedict better not plan on getting a CCHD grant anytime soon.

The CIW represents the kind of community organizing efforts conservatives have long condemned. To hear Glenn Beck tell it, community organizers are the modern day equivalent of storm troopers. The big businesses who fund conservative causes, and who stand accused of injustice by the community organizers, have a vested interest in de-legitimizing the work of groups like CIW. But, empowering the poor, helping workers achieve a modicum of dignity, and shining a light on injustice is an integral part of the Catholic vocation. Hichborn and Hudson should be ashamed of themselves (and they should gag on the next tomato they eat, which was likely picked by a CIW member!). And the bishops should recognize that these so-called pro-life champions are engaged in tactics that undercut the human dignity they claim to espouse.

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