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Franciscan group sees fertile future

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 8, 2011

Franciscan Action Network

The new director of the Franciscan Action Network, Patrick Carolan, is fast becoming a familiar face at inside-the-beltway gatherings of Catholics concerned about social justice. One day he is at a lunch hosted by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good. Another day finds him attending a conference on immigration reform at The Catholic University of America. Carolan goes to briefings at the bishops? conference offices. One night, he is at the hip downtown hangout Busboys & Poets for an education event cosponsored by the Franciscan Action Network and Alta Gracia Apparel, an organization that created a fair trade apparel factory in the Dominican Republic.

The hectic schedule of meetings around Washington keeps the 57-year-old Carolan busy to be sure. More importantly, all this activity has a purpose: raising awareness about the Franciscan Action Network, increasing the organization?s profile, learning about what other socially conscious groups are doing, and spreading the word through the network he began directing last December.

Carolan was a union organizer in Connecticut before coming to the Franciscan Action Network. He also was very active in his parish. He was able to bring the two strands in his life together when he applied for the job of director at the network. ?God led me here,? he told me over coffee at the Franciscan Action Network?s office. ?When I applied for the job I didn?t think I had a shot at getting it. I have strong ties with my faith, but most of my work on social justice was with secular groups.? Carolan?s wife told him, ?This is the perfect job for you.? He got the job in December and has been commuting from Connecticut on weekdays ever since. Carolan and his wife have four children.

The Franciscan Action Network was started four years ago. The goal is to share information, organize at the grass-roots level, and coordinate activities among various Franciscan organizations nationwide. ?There is such a wealth of knowledge within the Franciscan communities,? Carolan says. ?We can take that and share it with others.? The larger goal speaks to the explicitly religious character of the work. ?We are Franciscan, so we need to transform the world as Francis wanted, by embracing what we most fear, and, being transformed, truly care for our brothers and sisters,? Carolan says. Indeed, in Washington, Carolan finds this can be a big challenge. ?People don?t embrace what they fear. They build a wall around it.?

The network is engaged in a series of different projects. Their ongoing ?Care for Creation? project provides lectionary reflections, prayer and educational resources, and an adult formation program for use in parishes. The shareholder responsibility program has highlighted the work of the Sisters of St. Francis in Philadelphia, who joined with the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility to take on Goldman Sachs, submitting at a shareholder meeting a resolution that called for an end to bonuses at the Wall Street firm. The Franciscan Action Network has worked with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on a range of pro-life and social justice concerns.

One of the new projects of which Carolan is especially proud is an effort to get Catholic colleges and universities to only sell fair trade products on their campuses. The idea came from Siena College, a Franciscan school in upstate New York. Siena is one of only three universities in the country, and the only Catholic school, to have achieved fair trade status. Several years ago, under the leadership of Shannon O?Neill, director of the school?s Sr. Thea Bowman Center for Women, Siena began selling only fair trade coffee, tea, chocolate and other products in its campus dining halls. A Salvadoran coffee grower came to campus to speak about the ways fair trade improves the livelihoods of farmers and artisans in poor countries. College courses integrate the fair trade theme into the curriculum. ?We teach our students that every act they make as a consumer is value-laden and for us, given our Franciscan and Catholic mission, it just made sense to leverage our power as an institutional consumer to value solidarity with the poor and marginalized producers by purchasing fair trade certified products whenever possible,? O?Neill told NCR. Recently, the school began selling Alta Gracia clothing in its campus bookstore.

Carolan hopes to spread the fair trade program to other Franciscan colleges and beyond. He expresses the hope that socially conscious Catholics will contact their alma maters and urge them to follow in Siena?s footsteps. ?Sometimes we all need to be challenged to get out of our comfort zone,? he says. There is little of a comfort zone for Carolan and the interns working at the Franciscan Action Network office: They had just moved to the Hecker Center near Catholic University the day before our interview, and the office was filled with computers waiting to be hooked up and boxes waiting to be unpacked. There is one familiar face: Benjamin Feuerherd, son of the late *NCR* publisher and editor in chief Joe Feuerherd, is interning with the group this summer.

Carolan credits his mother with instilling him with a sense of social justice. She was an Irish immigrant who worked in a factory all of her life and had only a sixth-grade education. ?For all her hardships, she was the most welcoming woman in the neighborhood,? Carolan recalls. ?She used to tell us, ?We are all immigrants. This is God?s land. And if we want God to welcome us into his home, we?d better welcome strangers into our home.? ? The combination of homegrown commitment to Gospel values, a profound understanding of St. Francis? call to transformation, and a lifetime of experience fighting for social justice has turned Carolan into the perfect person to lead the Franciscan Action Network and promises a fertile next few years for the young organization.

[Michael Sean Winters writes Distinctly Catholic, a daily blog on the *NCR* Web site. See it at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic.]

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