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Despite 'tensions,' Catholics and administration working together

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 22, 2012

While the words ?Obama administration? and ?Catholic? have been used together in recent weeks frequently to only highlight discord between the executive branch and the U.S. bishops over the administration?s mandate requiring coverage of contraceptives in health care plans, federal funding figures may tell a different story.

It?s a story of ?partnership? and of the ?deep respect? the president has ?for the work of Catholic organizations around the country that are serving people and are helping the most vulnerable,? says one senior White House official.

Speaking in an exclusive phone interview late last week, Joshua DuBois, head of the White House?s Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, pointed to the administration?s efforts to help funnel funds -- estimated by the White House to total some $1.5 billion since 2008 -- to agencies like Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services in evincing that partnership.

Referencing the number of people who receive assistant from those, and other, Catholic groups, Dubois said that ?President Obama has been able to partner with Catholic institutions that serve those folks. And more than any political debate, I think that?s a really essential point.?

A senior official at Catholic Relief Services agreed that support of the administration, along with that of other government entities, aided CRS in its mission, but he did not characterize that relationship in as glowing terms as DuBois.

?CRS does assist tens of millions of people, frankly, with assistance from the U.S. government. And, in this administration, we?ve seen that support continue,? said Bill O?Keefe, CRS? senior director for advocacy.

But, he said, the agency has ?tensions and points of disagreement with every administration.?

The numbers seem to support DuBois? claims that Obama has increased focus on funding Catholic social justice work. According to a fact sheet provided by the White House, the administration has worked to funnel more than $1.5 billion since 2008 to Catholic agencies, including half a billion dollars to Catholic Relief Services focused towards ?global health and international development efforts.?

And according to Catholic Charities USA Annual Survey data, which are available online, annual federal funding to Catholic Charities? agencies nationwide has increased by over $100 million between 2008 and 2010, with the total allocation in 2010 reported to be $554,212,255.

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, a spokesperson for the U.S. bishops? conference, said that she saw the government?s allocation of funds to Catholic agencies ?as a recognition of the quality of the work of these Catholic agencies and a good investment.?

While the dollars being sent agencies? way are certainly significant, O?Keefe said a key thing to consider when

looking at budget allotments is the fact that it?s sometimes difficult to determine a direct cause and effect relationship between agency funding and administration support because of the ?many, many factors? present in the allocation process.

?The takeaway message for me is that we have not seen any kind of wholesale changes in our levels that one could attribute to changing administrations,? he said.

As an example of the back and forth of federal funding, O?Keefe pointed to President George W. Bush administration?s focus on funding the President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief, a program started by Bush in 2003 to fight the global HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The funding Bush funneled to that program, O?Keefe said, ?was historical. Millions of people are alive who wouldn?t be because of that administration?s commitment.?

While O?Keefe said funding for global health initiatives ?has generally persisted? in the Obama administration, he said ?there?s been more of an emphasis? on long term agricultural development.

?So every administration has its priorities and emphases, but the way that?s played out so far for is us that, roughly, we are holding our own, in terms of aggregate funding,? he said.

Walsh also said she thought it was important to note that while government money is helpful, it is being supplemented by donations at both the church?s national and parish levels. Referencing individuals who participate in parish fundraising programs, she said that ?by working with the church, the government is working with people who, because of their generosity, supplement the efforts.?

Asked who the president talks to when looking for Catholic input on issues, DuBois said the administration works ?with a range of organizations and individuals? including the U.S. bishops, which ?we work closely with ? on a range of issues, from foreign development to domestic housing.?

Among other Catholic organizations and people DuBois said the White House consults regularly are Maryknoll, NETWORK, the Catholic Health Association, and prominent Catholic academics.

The fact sheet provided by the White House also pointed to meetings Obama has had with Cardinal Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York and president of the bishops? conference; Salt Lake City Bishop John Charles Wester; and Las Cruces, N.M, Bishop Ricardo Ramirez.

One concern O?Keefe highlighted about federal funding is how discussions about reducing the national debt will affect future allocations. The failure last fall of the Congressional Supercommittee, tasked with coming up with a plan to reduce the national deficit, means that across the board federal spending cuts of some $1.2 trillion will be automatically triggered in January, unless Congress intervenes.

Those cuts, O?Keefe said, ?would be disastrous.?

?They would be program by program, indiscriminate,? he said. ?The administration would not have the discretion not to cut anti-retroviral treatments to people who will die without them. It is the worst possible scenario.?

Between now and January, O?Keefe said, CRS and the U.S. bishops? conference plan to ?keep pounding away? with their core message: ?It?s immoral to balance our budget on the backs of the poor.?

?It is unjust to make disproportionate cuts on these kinds of accounts, both internationally and domestically, which benefit the poorest of the poor,? said O?Keefe.

A message like that resonates with the president, said DuBois. Focus on social justice work, he said, is as ?an essential aspect of who President Obama is, both as the leader of this country and a father -- as someone who looks in the eyes of his two little girls and desires every child in our country to have the same opportunities they have.?

?He?s also a person of deep and abiding faith. And his Christian faith not only sustains him personally, but affects his view of how he sees the world and our obligations toward one another, our obligations to serve those who are the least of these, who are left out,? DuBois continued.

?So, while I don?t presume to speak for the president, I do know that his standing as a father, as a husband, as someone who has a deep concern for those who are most vulnerable flows from his faith and his values.?

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