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Who's funding the Catholic bishops' religious freedom campaign?

Tim Townsend St. Louis Post-Dispatch | Jun. 20, 2012

ATLANTA -- On Thursday, Catholics across the country will amplify what is an already loud outcry from the hierarchy over the federal government's so-called contraception mandate.

With rallies, marches, lectures and special publications, the U.S. Catholic Bishop's Fortnight for Freedom campaign will seek to galvanize Catholic opposition to President Barack Obama's proposed mandate to require employers -- including religious institutions -- to provide free contraception insurance coverage to employees.

But while Catholic leaders frame the events as a fight for religious liberty, critics see signs of political partisanship and electioneering. Questions over the financing of the bishops' campaign have caused those suspicions to multiply.

"The activities around the Fortnight for Freedom cost money," said Steve Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington. "What groups are paying for this, and what's the accountability for that money?"

Those kinds of questions were asked of key Catholic leaders like Baltimore Archbishop William Lori last week as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops met in Atlanta.

Lori, who heads the bishops' committee on religious liberty, told reporters that gifts "from Catholic groups and foundations" would help sustain the campaign. "The generosity we've experienced has been heartening," he said.

The campaign, Lori said, "is not in any way partisan, either in its spirit or in its funding."

But he has not been specific about all the outside groups providing financial resources, or how much they've contributed.

The Fortnight for Freedom campaign launches with a Mass celebrated by Lori at the nation's first cathedral, the

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. The two-week push comes as the church is also engaged in a legal battle over what Obama's administration considers a women's health issue.

In March, more than 40 Catholic institutions filed federal lawsuits seeking to block the contraception mandate. Lori told reporters lawyers were offering pro bono assistance to the Catholic legal effort.

Critics like Schneck say many of the questions regarding the funding of the Fortnight for Freedom campaign center on private Catholic groups.

"The Knights of Columbus are clearly one of the major sources of funding (against the mandate), as well as other fraternal organizations," Schneck said.

The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic charitable group based in New Haven, Conn., says it's the world's largest lay Catholic organization. Knights of Columbus life insurance sales neared $8 billion in 2010, and last year, it contributed $158 million to charity. In the last decade, the Knights have donated more than $1 billion to charity.

The group's 2010 tax forms show that the Knights gave more than $3 million to the Vatican that year, nearly $2 million to the U.S. bishops conference and $25,000 to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which has guided much of the legal action against the contraception mandate.

The group must disclose more recent donations in its 2011 tax forms. But Andrew Walther, a Knights of Columbus spokesman, said the group has asked for an extension in filing the documents, making them unavailable until the fall.

In 2010, the Knights were also generous with their contributions to individual bishops, doling out nearly $350,000 for a variety of programs in various dioceses. Of that, $248,700, or 71 percent, went to Lori's former Diocese of Bridgeport.

Lori -- who is the man most directly in charge of the Fortnight for Freedom campaign -- has been the Supreme Chaplain of the Knights of Columbus since 2005.

The Knights did not respond to requests for an interview about the organization's involvement with the bishops' campaign, but the organization has dedicated recent issues of its monthly magazine to the topic of religious liberty.

John Gehring, Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, a liberal advocacy group in Washington, said while the Knights' charitable works was "commendable ... its leadership has steered a fraternal organization into political waters in ways that should raise questions."

Asked by reporters in Atlanta last week if the Knights' involvement in the religious liberty campaign introduces at least the perception of partisanship, Lori said no. Other groups have contributed to the campaign, he said, mentioning Our Sunday Visitor and the Order of Malta.

"Think of what the Knights of Columbus does for the Catholic Church and for many other humanitarian causes," he said. "To try to say that is in some way partisan is ... an injustice."

[Tim Townsend writes for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in St. Louis.]

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