

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 24, 2012 at 8:41am

Bishops' longtime social justice spokesman retires

by Jerry Filteau



John Carr (CNS/Bob Roller)

WASHINGTON -- John Carr -- arguably the most important spokesman for Catholic social teaching in the U.S. today -- retired Aug. 31 as director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development.

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Carr has guided the past two generations of American bishops through the intricacies of connecting Catholic social and moral teaching with U.S. public policy.

The Washington Post Sept. 1 called Carr "the most important policy adviser to the country's Catholic bishops, their Karl Rove on everything from health care to clergy sex abuse," in the past 25 years.

One of Carr's favorite rhetorical (and practical) paradigms is the thoroughly Catholic "and." The church's social teaching, he would regularly say, backs the right to life of unborn children and their rights after birth; workers' rights and responsibilities; employers' rights and responsibilities. For Carr, Catholic

teaching on human rights and correlative responsibilities is an almost endless list of responsible human relationships in society.

Carr told *NCR* in an interview just before his retirement that he considered it "a privilege" to have worked for the bishops and regarded his interaction with them as an opportunity to help them align their public policy decisions with Catholic social teaching taken in its entirety.

For the fall semester Carr will hold a fellowship at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University in Boston. After that, he will head a new Center on Catholic Social Teaching and Public Engagement that he is in the process of forming at The Catholic University of America in Washington. The center aims to encourage younger Catholic lay men and women to engage in public life within the framework of Catholic social teaching.

He said that today, especially because of the "enormous impact" of Pope John Paul II, "Catholic social teaching is at the center of the church's life."

"It's not the church I grew up in," he said. Today, "the church's social mission is not fringe, it's central -- it's not optional."

A Minnesota native, Carr's first job after graduating from the College (now University) of St. Thomas in St. Paul with a degree in sociology was program coordinator of the Twin City Area Urban Corps in 1972. At the same time, a former high school and college seminarian, he worked for the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese as legislative coordinator for its Urban Affairs Commission.

He moved to Washington in 1975 to serve as the U.S. bishops' coordinator for urban issues.

From 1977 to 1981 he moved back into the public social justice sector, first as executive director of the National Committee for Full Employment, a coalition of more than 85 national religious, civil rights, labor and other organizations, and then (1979-81) as executive director of President Jimmy Carter's White House Conference on Families.

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As Washington archdiocesan secretary for social concerns, 1981-87, Carr was Cardinal James A. Hickey's chief advisor and decision-maker on archdiocesan social justice, pro-life and human service programs and activities. He led a major overhaul of the archdiocese's Catholic Charities operations, decentralizing services and giving new emphasis to partnerships with parishes.

Next Carr rejoined the bishops' conference as secretary of its Department of Social Justice and World Peace -- a job whose title changed and responsibilities expanded in 2007, to executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development.

The main difference is that since 2007 Carr has had responsibility not only for coordinating the U.S. bishops' positions on domestic and international public policy, but also for overseeing policies and grant-making of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Under his supervision the Catholic Campaign for Human Development has undergone a major renewal of its policies and grant-making procedures, which had been a target of conservative attacks for alleged failures to filter out from grants any organization even indirectly partnered with other organizations that opposed Catholic teaching on public policy issues such as gay marriage and artificial contraception.

In his *NCR* interview Carr challenged perceptions about the U.S. bishops both past and today.

In the 1970s and '80s, he said, "the charge was they cared about social justice and they didn't care about human life enough -- and that was wrong, it was unfair. And I think the charge today that they only care about human life or only care about religious freedom is wrong and unfair."

"We have had enormous support [from the entire bishops' conference] for our efforts, across the spectrum" of social justice issues, he said.

"But if we have a deficit -- and it's a deficit for the whole church, not just the bishops, and I want you to be careful with this -- it's a passion deficit, it's a visibility deficit. It's not a principles deficit. It's how do we lift up what we're doing every day.

"One of the reasons I leave [the bishops' conference] with a clear conscience is we have wonderful people here who will continue this work in exemplary fashion -- and it would be unfair to say the conference isn't going to continue to be a leader on defending the poor and working for peace."

Asked about his greatest satisfactions in his work for the bishops, Carr said that it "is that when the nation discusses whether to go to war, they use the categories of Catholic teaching, just cause, rightful authority."

Ten years ago, in the runup to the invasion of Iraq, he said, "the bishops shaped the debate. The sadness is they didn't share the judgment" of the final decision.

"Imagine if the president and Congress had taken the advice of the bishops and the pope on the Iraq War -- how much better we would be, how many lives lost, how many dollars spent. The church in Iraq is maybe among the most vulnerable churches in the world."

Carr said today's programs on Catholic social teachings in Catholic high schools and colleges are "much broader, much stronger" than in past years, but "not nearly what it needs to be."

"The teaching is stronger than ever," he said, "but our efforts to share it don't match the strength of the teaching, so you have a generation of laypeople who only have a vague sense of what our teaching offers. And that is a loss in every way, because our teaching gives us a different way of looking at the world. ...

"Our teaching says put the poor first. That's not the priorities of the House Ways and Means Committee. Our teaching says look at the economy from the bottom up. That's not the way *The Wall Street Journal* does it. Our teaching says watch out for the poor and vulnerable -- and the unborn, who are the most vulnerable of all -- and that's not how *The New York Times* sees it.

"My passion is that we have a different way of looking at the world, and the world needs to hear that," he said.

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