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Another CCHD Funding Brouhaha

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Distinctly Catholic

The witch hunt must end. A report in the *Chicago Sun-Times* states that the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has alerted some of its grant recipients in Illinois that they may lose their funding because they partner with an umbrella organization, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, that recently endorsed same-sex marriage.

"It's in our interest to preserve these relationships," Dylan Corbett told the *Sun-Times*. Corbett is the manager for mission and identity for CCHD. "These groups are doing really great work."

Still, according to the news story, the archdiocese of Chicago alerted the national CCHD to the decision by the coalition to support same-sex marriage and, in the event, the archdiocese must approve all CCHD grants within its jurisdiction.

There are a few different issues at stake here. First, the coalition was organized to assist immigrants. I am not sure why they decided to take a position on same-sex marriage. Do they have a position on the Keystone XL Pipeline? The AFL-CIO wisely, and through the intervention first of the late Msgr. George Higgins and subsequently through the ongoing influence of Fr. Clete Kiley, has never taken a position on *Roe v. Wade*. Why should it? Groups organized around specific concerns should stick to those concerns. Yes, they may join or stand with a party that stakes out a position on other issues, but that is a further step removed and a natural part of the political process. Issue-specific groups like the coalition in Illinois risk alienating supporters when they stray from their specific issue.

That fact does not let the CCHD off the hook, which leads to the second concern. There needs to be a sense of balance in deciding how to react to such situations. I would call attention here to Cardinal Timothy Dolan's op-ed on immigration reform Monday.

The immigration bill backed by the "Gang of 8" in the Senate is not perfect, but "goes a long way toward correcting injustices in the system," Dolan wrote. "Despite its shortcomings, the bill significantly improves upon the status quo and will assist millions of families. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress to improve the legislation, and we applaud lawmakers of both parties who are working together to bring 11 million people out of the shadows."

No lines in the sand. No "my way or the highway" language. No letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. If the groups that work on assisting immigrants in Illinois receive CCHD grants, and they happen to belong to this coalition for reasons that have nothing to do with the coalition's stance on gay marriage, why defund the good work they are admittedly doing?

Cardinal Dolan's approach to the immigration bill was sadly not the approach the U.S. bishops took to the Affordable Care Act. There, based mostly on a tendentious reading of the provisions governing the funding of abortion, the bishops opposed the bill. A court has ruled that the ACA does not, as the bishops feared, provide additional government funding for abortion. (It also does not create "death panels," another scare tactic used by those who did not want to see the ACA pass.) Funding an organization is different from passing legislation, but the bishops must decide whether their premier anti-poverty program, the CCHD, will continually be held hostage by those who allow other concerns, such as fighting same-sex marriage, to limit the good work CCHD does. Does this not invite a witch hunt atmosphere? As well, does it not allow, in this instance, gay rights advocates to set the agenda, minimizing the church's influence over these groups? This is a no-win situation.

There are situations in which a grant recipient could prove itself so opposed to the church that continued funding is a counter-sign to the church's mission and identity. Public advocacy of abortion funding and abortion rights would, in my mind, be one of those situations: The church's struggle to defend the unborn is foundational in a way that fighting same-sex marriage is not. Even in the case of support for abortion rights, distinctions should be drawn: Does the group's support consist of a single public statement? Does it mount a campaign? Is that support an integral part of the group's work?

There is reason to worry deeply about the church's identity. I worry that too many Catholics do not take the implications of their faith seriously and blithely accept the Protestant and Enlightenment idea that faith should be kept private. I worry, also, that too much of our Catholic identity is invested in where we stand on issues of sexual morality and of ethics generally. There is a whiff of Jansenism in the American church, and it has been there for some time; for example, see the Legion of Decency. I worry that in the focus of both some on the right and some on the left on these hot-button, controversial issues, we miss the forest for the trees. I read the Creed we all recite every Sunday and see in its words a profound challenge to the anthropocentric, market-driven, advertising-laden, self-indulgent culture in which we live that goes far deeper than mere ethics. In this idol-filled world, the opening line of the Creed, "I believe in one God," should get stuck in many throats.

I also have to say I worry less about the church's identity since Papa Francesco was elected pope. He is continually urging us to go to the peripheries of life, to the margins, to the poor. There, we will often find very messy lives. There, we will come into contact with people who have made very bad decisions. There, we will not find a pristine universe for preaching the Gospel. And there, too, we will encounter the suffering flesh of Jesus Christ. The new pope encourages us not to worry about making mistakes, but to take the risk, get out of the sacristy and the Ivory Tower, go and meet Christ in those he loves most especially, the poor. This is not mere do-gooderism. I do not believe the church will flourish on account of our good works, and the CCHD funds many good works. I believe the church will flourish in its work not because of the earthly improvement of human lives by this work, but by the encounter itself, by the

grace that flows from meeting Jesus Christ where he can always be found, amidst the poor and the suffering, as surely as we can always find him in the tabernacle. The Altar Society always keeps the bronze doors of the tabernacle burnished and gleaming. The sacristan keeps the candles lit and the flowers fresh. It is not like that in the ghetto. But Christ's flesh is present. That is enough for me. It seems like it is enough for the pope. It should be enough for the CCHD.

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