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Report: Conservatives' attacks threaten bishops' anti-poverty organization

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A newly released report highlights the ongoing threats to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. church's premier anti-poverty initiative, from conservative groups and prelates who object to giving money to organizations not in full compliance with church teaching.

The "guilt by association" attacks are primarily the work of the American Life League, according to the report released Tuesday by the group Faith in Public Life [1]. In 2009, the league, based in Stafford, Va., organized a coalition of more than two dozen organizations, many of them from the extreme right of the political and religious spectrum, to campaign against the anti-poverty program, according to the report.

The coalition, named "Reform CCHD Now," employs "McCarthy era" tactics, sending its "exposé-style reports and videos" to every U.S. bishop and calling for boycotts of parish collections supporting the anti-poverty program, writes John Gehring, Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life and author of the report.

The U.S. bishops launched the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in 1969 as part of a "National Catholic Crusade Against Poverty." It has always enjoyed significant support from ordinary Catholics. In the second year of its existence, it raised more than $8 million, "the largest single collection in the church at the time." By the mid-1990s, the collection exceeded $13 million.

One of the first major opponents of the campaign was William E. Simon, a conservative Catholic and former Nixon administration treasury secretary. He criticized the campaign in a 1989 letter to the Knights of Malta, an influential Catholic organization, calling it a "funding mechanism for radical left political activism."

The late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, a noted conservative thinker, and other prominent conservative Catholic writers have at various times called for the bishops to eliminate the campaign.

On the other hand, the campaign received an endorsement from Pope John Paul II during his 1979 visit, when he praised its effort to address "the causes of poverty and not merely the evil effects of injustice."

In more recent years, opponents' focus has moved from the campaign's politics to the vast array of nonreligious organizations it funds, scrutinizing their activities for any hint of support for abortion, same-sex marriage or other issues that have come to dominate discussions of Catholic identity.

The Faith in Public Life report is titled " 'Be Not Afraid?': Guilt by Association, Catholic McCarthyism and Growing Threats to the U.S. Bishops' Anti-Poverty Mission." It takes on added significance with an impressive list of Catholic endorsers, including leadership organizations of religious women and men; several major social justice organizations; nine retired bishops, including two former presidents of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; the presidents of the Catholic Theological Society of America and of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States; Stephen Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and

Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America; and more than two dozen other individuals and groups.

Since its inception, the campaign has dispersed more than $280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based projects, according to the report. Among its grants in recent years:

- The campaign has aided Latino and Haitian farm workers in Florida in their efforts to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions with major fast-food chains.
- In Texas, the campaign has aided an organization that works to improve housing, education and job training for low-income members.
- The bishops approved $1 million in special grants "to mobilize Catholics to support passage of comprehensive immigration reform."

The attacks by American Life League and its coalition, which have intensified in recent years, have ranged from criticism of Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley for his presence at Sen. Ted Kennedy's funeral to accusations against John Carr, director of the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development for more than 20 years.

In the latter case, the league said Carr was part of "a systematic pattern of cooperation with evil" because he once sat on the board of the Center for Community Change, an organization that the league claims supports abortion rights and same-sex marriage, according to the report. The charges were without merit, the report said, and Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., "described the smear campaign against Carr as a 'very sad, sad commentary on the honesty of some people in these pressure groups.' "

Critics of the campaign argue that the bishops should prohibit money from going to any group that does not adhere to Catholic teaching in all of its activities, a requirement that would severely restrict anti-poverty work, according to those involved in the campaign. In fact, such a requirement would appear to significantly narrow rules known as the "Krol guidelines," proposed by the late Cardinal John Krol in the early '70s, when he was president of the bishops' conference.

The guidelines were devised after someone complained that campaign contributions had gone to "organizations which participate in abortion and birth control programs," a claim found to be without merit. Krol decided that an organization could not receive money if its primary purpose was opposed to Catholic teaching. "However, if the primary purpose of a program was in line with church teaching, it could receive Campaign funds -- even if a tangential project was not in accord with Catholic moral teaching," the report says.

The 37-page report includes a variety of examples and three case studies of attacks by the anti-CCHD coalition on the basis of what would be considered a group's "tangential projects" under the Krol rules.

One longtime recipient of funds from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development was the Land Stewardship Project, a Minneapolis-based organization that trains new farmers and advocates for sustainable local agriculture.

The American Life League compiled one of its dossiers on the project and sent it to the local bishop and officials at the U.S. bishops' conference in Washington. Last summer, the Land Stewardship Project learned it would lose a $48,000 grant it had been awarded if it did not end its membership in two organizations: the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and TakeAction Minnesota. Among the many activities undertaken on a range of social justice issues, the two organizations had taken a position supporting same-sex marriage.

The Land Stewardship Project never took a position on nor did it work on Minnesota's 2012 ballot initiative restricting marriage to opposite-sex couples. After consultation with board members, the Land Stewardship Project decided that "renouncing its membership in the two groups would hurt its effectiveness as a statewide

advocacy group." It lost its grant, but donations -- including from one Catholic who wrote a check for $25,000 -- more than made up for the loss.

During the last year, five affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation, "one of the nation's largest networks of faith-based community organizers," lost campaign funds, and in recent years, eight Catholic dioceses have dropped the campaign's annual collection in parishes.

"At a time when poverty is growing and people are hurting we should not withdraw from our commitment to helping the poor," Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, retired head of the Galveston-Houston archdiocese, was quoted in the report. Fiorenza, a former president of the bishops' conference, said, "Catholic identity is far broader than opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. Catholic identity is a commitment to living the Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it, and this must include a commitment to those in poverty."

Previous reports:

- "Minnesota nonprofit for farmers loses grant for ties to groups opposing marriage bill [2]," Oct. 26, 2012
- *NCR* columnist Michael Sean Winters investigated the American Life League in 2011 [3].
- "10 dioceses quit bishops' antipoverty campaign [4]," Jul. 7, 2010
- "Charges against bishops' official called false, ridiculous [5]," Feb. 5, 2010

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