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Editorial: Church leaders should work with, and smell like, the sheep

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Editorial

One of the most striking themes of this still young papacy is Pope Francis' repeated call for the church to go to those "at the periphery" and "at the margins," especially the poor. He compares such an evangelical church to a church that is "self-referential," which becomes, in his word, "sick." Francis has even said that it is better to go to the margins and make mistakes than to become self-absorbed.

Francis was speaking in generalities, but if he had been inclined to select a specific example of what he meant, he could do no better than to consider the situation of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and its critics. The U.S. bishops initiated the campaign in 1969 and it continues to serve as the church's principal nationwide anti-poverty program. Since its inception, it has put a strong emphasis on empowering poor people through community organizing -- not just helping them but helping them organize themselves so they can help themselves. The campaign is funded by an annual collection taken in almost all parishes.

Critics, led by the American Life League and a coalition it founded called Reform CCHD Now, have charged the campaign with compromising the church's teachings by joining in coalitions with non-Catholic groups, some of which do not support Catholic teaching on issues like same-sex marriage. Some bishops used the coalition's spurious arguments to justify withdrawing from the campaign. The coalition bullied other bishops into tightening requirements for campaign participation.

Last issue, *NCR* wrote about a recent report from the group Faith in Public Life, accusing the campaign's critics of McCarthyist tactics and cataloging the scurrilous ways they have sought to undermine the anti-poverty program. This issue carries an update to that report (**See story [1]**).

Ironically, and proving the report's thesis, the Cardinal Newman Society, another self-appointed watchdog of Catholic orthodoxy, challenged the report from Faith in Public Life, not by confronting its evidence or arguments but by throwing out guilt-by-association accusations. "Faith in Public Life has long been allied with Catholic and other religious groups that oppose the church on key public policy issues," the Cardinal Newman Society stated on its website. The society noted that one of Faith in Public Life's board members works at a union, and that one of the listed supporters of the report, Stephen Schneck, a professor of political science at The Catholic University of America, was a member of Catholics for Obama -- as if these associations somehow tainted the organization. If that were not enough, the society noted Jesuits and academics from Jesuit institutions had signed on to the report, which is apparently, in the Cardinal Newman Society's eyes, the kiss of death, or at least a smooch of heresy.

In one sense, it is hard to fathom why the Catholic Campaign for Human Development has generated such controversy. For some, no doubt, it is enough to be involved in community organizing, which became a lightning rod during the successful 2008 presidential campaign of former community organizer Barack Obama. The tea party soon turned its sights on ACORN, another community organizing outfit, and successfully shut it down. The mere mention of the name Saul Alinsky, the intellectual father of contemporary community organizing, sends some sectors of the conservative pundit class into a lather.

In another sense, it is easy to understand why the campaign has touched such a powerful chord. When you actually go into the lives of people who live at the margins, you rarely find pristine moral situations. And in America's pluralistic society, all sorts of people find themselves drawn together to work on a particular cause, even while they differ markedly on other, unrelated issues. In short, paraphrasing Francis, if you work with the sheep, you will begin to smell like sheep.

But here is the difference. Francis, the first Jesuit pontiff, wants the church's leaders to smell like their sheep. The critics of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development seem to want a smaller, purer church, sanitized and odorless. They have adopted not the theology, but the spiritual disposition of the great enemy of the Jesuits in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Jansenists. They, too, wanted a smaller, purer church. They, too, saw sin everywhere and wished to retreat into a pristine world, totally under their own control, turning the church into a sect. It was not to be then, and it should not be now. Francis is right and we commend the U.S. bishops for standing by the campaign. Helping the poor is as essential to the life of the church as its worship. As Bishop Jaime Soto, chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the campaign, says, the anti-poverty program is "making the Incarnation happen again." If that is not a task befitting the church of Jesus Christ, we don't know what is.

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