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USCCB releases resource guide on Girl Scouts for Catholic parishes

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Apr. 9, 2014

Responding to concerns about Catholic involvement with Girl Scouts, a U.S. bishops' committee released key points from its dialogue with Girl Scout leaders outlining major concerns of church leaders and the national organization's responses.

The aim of the resource, issued April 2 by the bishops' Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, was not to support or oppose Catholic involvement with Girl Scouts of the USA, known as GSUSA, but to provide local bishops, pastors, youth leaders and parents with necessary information to determine their level of involvement.

Catholics have been affiliated with Girl Scouts for 100 years and there are an estimated 400,000 Catholic girls among the nation's 3 million Girl Scouts. In the past few years, questions about the organization have sparked online discussions, boycotts of Girl Scout cookies and the ousting of troops from Catholic parishes.

Concerns have been raised about the Girl Scouts' relationship with Planned Parenthood and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, known as WAGGGS. There also have been questions about the organization's policy on human sexuality and contraception and its program materials and resources.

The bishops' committee spent one year gathering information about concerns and another year in dialogue with Girl Scout leaders in an effort to clarify the issues.

"The exchanges between USCCB staff and GSUSA staff were pleasant, informative and respectful. GSUSA staff was generous with their time, indicated a strong desire and willingness to work more closely with the Catholic Church in the United States," said the committee, noting that the resource materials are not only posted on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website [1] but also the Girl Scouts' site [2].

In providing the information it obtained, the committee said the decision for Catholics to participate or not in Girl Scouts is a local one and that "diocesan bishops have the final authority over what is appropriate for Catholic Scouting in their dioceses."

This material "does not intend to be exhaustive," the committee noted, nor was it an attempt to "make decisions or set out national norms."

It also recognized "the history of significant work and relationships between Girl Scouts and the church and the service Girl Scout councils and troops have provided dioceses, parishes and local communities."

In a question-and-answer section, the Girl Scouts said they have "no official relationship" with Planned Parenthood. They also said the way GSUSA is structured does not allow the national office "to prohibit local councils or troops from collaborating with or forming their own local relationships with Planned Parenthood" or other organizations.

Regarding WAGGGS -- an international group based in London that describes itself as advocating for the education of girls and young women and promoting "sexual and reproductive health/rights" -- GSUSA said it "only participates in select WAGGGS programming" and does not have "the ability or purview to criticize, explicitly distance itself from, or change particular advocacy positions within WAGGGS." Its contributions to the organization are only from investment income and not from cookie sales, dues or registration fees.

The Girl Scouts said their national office has a neutral policy on sexuality and contraception but that it doesn't "prohibit individual councils or troops from taking a position or sponsoring programming on human sexuality or other topics" if the troop has parental consent and other approvals.

In a question about Scout membership by youths who identify themselves as transgender, the Girl Scouts said: "Placement of transgender youth is handled on a case-by-case basis, with the welfare and best interests of the child and the members of the troop/group in question a top priority."

Within this resource, the bishops' committee stressed the need for communication between diocesan leaders and local Girl Scout councils as well as using a "memorandum of understanding" which is a form establishing mutual understanding between Girl Scouts and dioceses and parishes stressing that parish troops are "free from any programming or activities contrary to the church's teaching."

Robert McCarty, executive director of the Washington-based National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in Washington and an adviser in the dialogue sessions with GSUSA and the bishops' committee, said there has been a long history of secular organizations partnering with the church and the cooperation needs "regular communication and a sense of accountability."

McCarty told Catholic News Service on Tuesday that Catholics working with secular organizations does not mean "blanket endorsement" of them. He also stressed that the dialogue between the bishops' committee and the Girl Scouts provides "a starting point" to "find common ground and move forward."

He said the Girl Scout leaders had "every right to feel criticized but they did not." Instead, he said they met with Catholic leaders and were willing to change things and even redo materials.

McCarty said the USCCB resource will not satisfy everyone and said that just that day, he received letter from a Catholic who said people in her parish want her to stop leading the parish Girl Scout troop because of claims they had heard of its association with Planned Parenthood.

Gladys Padro-Soler, GSUSA's faith and social issues adviser, told CNS in an email Wednesday that Girl Scout leaders "are confident that the USCCB's new Web resource will encourage Girl Scout councils and local dioceses that have experienced trying times during this period to reclaim the collaboration and communication they have always shared."

She noted that GSUSA "believes local issues are best solved with local solutions" and hopes that diocesan offices and Girl Scout councils use "memorandums of understanding" to clearly identify their partnership terms and to also alleviate "concerns a diocese may have about Girl Scouts' service to girls."

"Ultimately," she said, "it is the church's own parishioners that deliver the Girl Scout program and they are empowered both by GSUSA and the church to ensure the program meets their faith's tenets."

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Links:

[1] http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/who-we-teach/youth/catholic-scouting-questions.cfm
[2] http://www.girlscouts.org/program/basics/faith/catholic_church_relationship.asp