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Polarization in Catholic church lamented

Dennis Coday | Feb. 9, 2010 NCR Today

John Gehring, director of communications for the Washington-based Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, sent us the following report from the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington.

USCCB Official Laments Polarization in Catholic Church

Days after the American Life League issued a press release [1] denouncing John Carr, the Executive Director of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as being part of ?a systemic pattern of cooperation with evil? because of his past association with an anti-poverty organization that the group claimed also supports abortion rights and same-sex marriage, Carr addressed the controversy in a speech at the annual Catholic Social Justice Ministry Gathering in Washington, DC on Feb. 8.

The American Life League, who last summer sold ?Bury Obamacare with Kennedy [2]? signs just days after the late Sen. Ted Kennedy died, sparked controversy in Catholic circles last week when it questioned Carr?s pro-life commitment because he formerly served as board chairman at the Center for Community Change, a Washington-based organization that focuses on poverty, housing and immigration issues. In a Feb. 2 e-mail, the Center for Community Change said: ?As always, the Center speaks out on issues of poverty and does not apologize for its views. That said, abortion has never been and is not currently an issue on which the Center either now or in the future focuses its resources. Thus, when the far right claims that, ?reproductive rights and homosexuality? are among ?CCC?s core advocacy focuses,? they are simply purveying a blatant falsehood.?

Expressing gratitude for the letters and calls of support [3] he has received in recent days from bishops, pro-life leaders and others across the ideological spectrum, Carr lamented the growing divisions within the Catholic community.

?The political polarization of our society is now moving into the Church, he said. ?It raises some questions. Does your faith shape your politics or the other way around? Are you more Catholic than Democrat or Republican?...I?m fearful that this is all leading to ?war rooms? and attacks ads. This shouldn?t be happening. We are a community of faith.?
He noted that Fr. Frank Pavone, the Director of Priests for Life, was the first to call him and offer his support even though, as Carr noted, ?we don?t always agree on how Faithful Citizenship (the U.S. bishops? election year political responsibility statement) should be applied.? Several bishops have also strongly defended Carr in recent days, including Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., who chairs the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development. He described what happened as a ?very sad, sad commentary on the honesty of some people in these pressure groups."

Carr also addressed recent attacks [4] against the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S.

bishops? initiative that for the past four decades has empowered community organizations to help low-income citizens. The American Life League, Human Life International and the Bellarmine Veritas Ministry launched a Reform CCHD Now coalition that encouraged a boycott of the national collection in Catholic churches recently because it said grants were funding organizations with positions contrary to Catholic social teaching. Carr defended the campaign and related the work of CCHD to the core themes of justice and charity emphasized by Pope Benedict XIV in his encyclical Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth). ?The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is the institutional example of charity and empowerment of the poor,? he said

In contrast to the divisions perpetuated by some in the Catholic community, Carr applauded the hundreds of leaders gathered in the nation?s capital this week for the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering. Organized by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the annual event features workshops and lobby visits on Capitol Hill. It is co-sponsored by a broad range of organizations including Catholic Charities USA, Just Faith Ministries, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Relief Services and the Catholic Health Association.

?You know how unusual it is to get so many elements of the Church working together like this,? Carr said. ?To come together across these lines is unusual and essential.?

The snowstorm that hit the mid-Atlantic dampened the annual gathering, which is sponsored by 20 Catholic organizations, including five offices of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Catholic News Service reports that attendance was cut in half.

One keynote speaker, Ray Boshara, a vice president and senior research fellow of the New America Foundation, couldn't to fly to Washington to deliver his remarks in person because of the snowstorm, but he spoke from the kitchen of his home in St. Louis via Skype, an Internet text, phone and video service.

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