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An indecent, unchristian witch-hunt

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 2, 2010

Viewpoint

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the ?domestic antipoverty, social justice program of the U.S. Catholic bishops,? has been the target of attacks from a group of conservative Catholic advocacy and media outfits during the past four months for allegedly doing business with groups that promote abortion and same-sex marriage.

The attacks were orchestrated by a coalition -- made up of the American Life League, the publication *Catholic Advocate*, the one-man show at Bellarmine Veritas Ministry, RealCatholicTV and other like-minded organizations -- that calls itself Reform CCHD Now. It wants the bishops to ?thoroughly vet all [Catholic Campaign for Human Development] grantees for compliance with Catholic teaching on social justice, life and family issues.? Many antipoverty programs supported by the campaign are nondenominational.

The attacks drew unusual attention recently when the coalition focused on John Carr, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the bishops? conference, and who once served on the board of an antipoverty organization that includes staff who do not share the church?s teachings on a variety of matters. The charges leveled at Carr were just the latest in a long campaign, more rooted in politics than theological orthodoxy, to discredit the bishops? social justice work.

The Center for Community Change, where Carr served on the board from 1999 to 2006, is a nationally recognized umbrella organization for social justice and community-organizing groups. Carr wrote in a statement responding to the charges, ?My experience with [the center] was that it focused on poverty, housing and immigration and had no involvement in issues involving abortion and homosexuality. When I served, the board never discussed or acted on any position involving these matters and if they had, I would have vigorously opposed any advocacy for access to abortion or gay marriage.?

Last year, just before the annual parish collection for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the ?Reform CCHD Now? group urged Catholics not to give. They claimed that 31 organizations that received some $1.3 million in funds from the campaign were ?anti-Catholic,? and accused the Center for Community Change of being a ?politically radical, anti-life, pro-homosexualist? organization.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is pushing back against the attacks. *NCR* obtained a memo that Msgr. David Malloy, general secretary of the conference, sent Feb. 2 to all bishops. Malloy wrote: ?I regret that these recent stories serve to undermine the work of the conference and its unwavering fidelity to the church?s teaching about life and marriage by attempting to alienate the bishops from their staff where absolutely no division exists. I am sorry that your time and mine must be taken up by this unwarranted and uncharitable attack on the character of the staff of the conference.?

At the InsideCatholic Web site, Deal Hudson inadvertently admitted that the charges against Carr amounted to guilt by association, writing, ?But none of the reports contain anything about Carr?s personal convictions, only

his associations.? The charges were repeated at countless conservative Catholic sites, but none of the bloggers ever contacted Carr or the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for comment.

Carr, meanwhile, has received significant public support from bishops he?s worked with in the past. In a press statement, Bishop William Murphy, chairman of the bishops? Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, said, ?I?m concerned about these attacks on John Carr and I know they are false and I think they are even calumnious. I am taking this to be a very sad, sad commentary on the honesty of some people in these pressure groups.?

The attacks on the campaign have a long partisan history. Back in the 1980s, William Simon, who was appointed treasury secretary by Richard Nixon, denounced the Catholic Campaign for Human Development as a ?funding mechanism for radical left-wing political activism in the United States, rather than for traditional types of charities.? Simon was half-right: The campaign tries to help groups that teach the poor to help themselves. But, like the contemporary critics, he mischaracterized the campaign?s work as political.

It is curious, especially, that these conservative groups claim for themselves the mantle of hyper-orthodoxy even while they are attacking the bishops. And to be clear: These attacks are on the bishops, even though the darts are thrown at their staff. ?The closer we look at the bishops? conference [staff and programs], the more we find a systemic pattern of cooperation with evil,? Michael Hichborn, American Life League?s lead researcher into the charges, told LifeSiteNews. The charge was picked up by other right-wing mouthpieces.

Do members of this right-wing coalition really think that the bishops are dolts, that they are incapable of meaningful oversight of their own staff? Or do they all think that the bishops, too, are involved in a ?systemic pattern of cooperation with evil?? That kind of hyperbole, of course, is not new. Judie Brown, the president of American Life League, accused Boston Cardinal Sean O?Malley of ?spitting on Christ? when he presided at the funeral of Sen. Edward Kennedy last August.

The Italians have a wonderful word for this kind of thing -- scatenato, which means ?unhinged.? It is kooky stuff, except that when it is amplified over and over on conservative blogs and given airtime on EWTN, it is dangerous. Not to the reputation of Carr or O?Malley or the others the attackers put within their sights. These witch-hunts are dangerous to the church itself, to the credibility of the Gospel, in which Christ said that Christians should be known by their love, not by their hatreds. Sadly, if the anti-CCHD crowd has its way, Catholic Christians will be known by their witch-hunts. The attacks are indecent. They are shameful. They are unchristian. They are beneath contempt.

[Michael Sean Winters is a regular *NCR* contributor.]

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