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End the 'Witch Hunt' Approach at Catholic Community-Organizing Fund



By Pablo Eisenberg

The spirit of the medieval Inquisition is not yet dead.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has since the early part of the decade been tightening the guidelines that govern grant making by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a foundation that distributes about \$8-million a year to some 250 grass-roots organizations that run antipoverty programs and fight for economic justice. Those dollars have been a major source of support for community-organizing groups throughout the country.

Under pressure from conservative bishops and Catholic groups like the American Life League and Reform CCHD Now, the campaign started to require its grantees to sign a statement that they would not run programs or projects that contradict Catholic doctrine.

But it added an even tougher restriction more recently, telling groups over the past couple of years that it would not provide money to them if they joined coalitions or had even the remotest association with organizations that support birth control, same-sex marriage, or other activities that are not closely in line with official Catholic teachings. The campaign, with the help of conservative Catholic groups, is intensely scrutinizing organizations they already have supported to make sure they follow the guidelines.

So far, at least nine groups have lost support, *The New York Times* reports. Other groups have been so scared off by the rules that they decided not to apply for new money. And several community

organizations that had been approved to receive grants were nevertheless denied money by local bishops who must approve all grants awarded in their dioceses.

The actions of the conservative bishops who control the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have attracted criticism from more liberal bishops, priests, lay employees of the conference, and officials of grass-roots groups who disagree with and are embarrassed by the changes at the campaign.

The strict guidelines governing the associations of grantees came after conservative leaders tried to shut down the campaign altogether. Supporters quietly mobilized to preserve the antipoverty work, but they were forced as part of a compromise to accept the restriction on alliances with groups that oppose Catholic teachings.

It is one thing to demand fealty to church principles from grant recipients; it is quite another to insist that these groups cannot in any way be associated with other organizations that do not adhere to the church's teachings. Guilt by association, the old McCarthy tactic, has now taken root in the campaign.

The campaign's director, Ralph McCloud, put it succinctly, telling *The New York Times*: "We can't in any way have groups who are collaborating with other groups whose main focus is objectionable or contrary to Catholic teachings. ... We're upfront with that."

What this means in practice is that an organization like Compañeros, a small nonprofit in southern Colorado that helps Hispanic immigrants, has lost its money from the campaign—some \$30,000—because it refuses to quit the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, as the *Times* reported. One of the coalition's members advocates gay rights.

Surprisingly, few people in the nonprofit world have publicly opposed the campaign's tightened guidelines and the pressure exercised on it by conservative Catholic organizations. Many community-organizing groups and their networks depend on local Catholic churches so they have been reluctant to speak out. Other organizing groups have also been quiet, in part because they believe that the Catholic group's policy is irrelevant to their constituencies and needs. Progressive nonprofit organizations in general, as so often is the case, don't seem anxious to engage in the issue, preferring instead to stay on the sidelines.

Nor have any foundations or other donors spoken out publicly to criticize the campaign.

What's more encouraging is that some Catholics are beginning to mobilize opposition. Catholics United, a Washington group with 40,000 members, last week announced WithCharityForAll.org, a Web site that allows Catholics to make donations to support charities that lost money from the campaign due to the pressure of conservative groups.

James Salt, director of the group, said in a press release that "if an organization can be defunded simply because of who they hang out with, it makes you wonder just how far the bishops will go in service of this right-wing witch hunt."

He also noted in an interview that he was surprised that the church, which has been losing members in the United States, doesn't recognize the potential for recruiting immigrants as new members and instead seems willing to "push them under the bus."

Since the Campaign for Human Development was established in 1969, it has had a rich and distinguished record of supporting community-organizing groups that have made enormous changes on behalf of social and economic justice. The foundation set an important tone for other grant makers who began to underwrite grass-roots organizations that not only ran antipoverty programs but also sought to build power for its low-income constituents.

As one of the first non-Catholics to sit on the campaign's national advisory committee, I was proud of the organization and delighted to be associated with the grass-roots movement it was creating. Now I am deeply disappointed, as are other one-time supporters, that the bishops have failed to balance their mission to poor people with their religious doctrines.

Tolerance for diverse perspectives and views is a hallmark of democracy and civil society. Guilt by association is antithetical to the American tradition. The sooner the conservative bishops realize this, the sooner the campaign can once again regain its luster and place of honor.

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