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Toronto — April 12, 2018
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Citing "alarming concerns" related to an ongoing investigation, Cardinal Thomas Collins of Toronto has joined Western bishops and other dioceses across Canada in withholding funds from the overseas development agency of the Canadian bishops' conference.

At least eight dioceses have suspended financial support to Development and Peace following preliminary results of a probe that found some of the agency's partners conflict with Catholic moral and social teaching, particularly on abortion, contraception and gender theory.

The Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops issued a statement April 9 confirming that a "joint research project" with Development and Peace is underway in response to questions raised about some of its partners. Following preliminary findings, the CCCB "expressed concern" to the agency, and now both parties are "hopeful that any necessary clarifications will be determined shortly," according to the statement.

Among dioceses withholding funds are Toronto and St. Catharines in Ontario; Calgary, Edmonton and St. Paul in Alberta; Vancouver and Nelson in British

Columbia; and Whitehorse, Yukon.

Collins noted the Canadian bishops' review of the Development and Peace partners "has produced alarming concerns about dozens of overseas organizations." He said pending a more detailed report expected in coming months, the Toronto Archdiocese will hold back approximately $800,000 earmarked for Development and Peace from the archdiocesan ShareLife campaign.

"It is critical to ensure that it (Development and Peace) allocates no funds to projects or groups that operate contrary to the moral and social teachings of the church," the April 11 statement said.

Later the same day, Archbishop J. Michael Miller announced the Vancouver Archdiocese had joined the growing list of those "temporarily withholding" Development and Peace's share of donations collected in its annual Share Lent appeal. He wrote that the funds are being withheld until he receives "clear assurance" that Development and Peace's partner agencies "comply with Catholic teaching and with the criteria set out by Caritas Internationalis."

An April 4 statement from Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith suggested an estimated 40 of the agency's partners "appear to show evidence of conflict with Catholic moral and social teaching and, in particular, that they do not demonstrate full respect for the sanctity of human life."

Smith also said funding to Development and Peace would be suspended until "clear assurance" is received that funds "will be used only by agencies whose mission, values and practices cohere with the teachings of the Catholic Church and with the criteria of Caritas Internationalis."

Romain Duguay, deputy executive director of Development and Peace, told Edmonton's Grandin Media that the agency remains committed to upholding church teaching, is cooperating with the CCCB investigation and aims to improve communications with the bishops.

"The archbishop has raised serious questions, and they need to be answered," Duguay said. "We will do our due diligence to respond to them and demonstrate that we are not doing anything against the position of the church."

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Smith said the issue came to light in a report presented to the February meeting in Winnipeg of the 25-member Assembly of Western and Northern Canadian Catholic Bishops.

Whitehorse Bishop Hector Vila Martinez and Calgary Bishop
William McGrattan released similar letters that labeled as "serious and credible" allegations that several Development and Peace partners "condone and even advocate policies and practices which are not in compliance with Catholic teachings and, in particular, do not fully respect the sanctity of human life."

If the bishops are not satisfied that Development and Peace and its partners follow Catholic teaching, funds that were collected and earmarked for the agency will be diverted to other charities. The bishops' letters assured parishioners these funds "will only be used to assist people in need in the Global South."

Duguay said his agency could have done a better job of communication.

"But we are confident that this process will strengthen the relationship with the bishops, and they will see that we are actually very strong about the position of the church and all the values that the church wants to promote," he said.

Duguay said Development and Peace works with local partners because they want to empower local people and groups that are helping the poor in their own countries and working to address social justice issues. But organizations and projects may evolve over time and come to embrace values that are not in keeping with church teaching, he said.

"If that's the case, D&P will not work with them and will go in search of another partner," he said.

Development and Peace is the official international development organization of the Church in Canada, and one of 160 members of Caritas Internationalis. It was established by the bishops of Canada in 1967 to foster justice and integral human development in the Southern Hemisphere.

Similar allegations against the agency in 2009 resulted in an investigation that resulted in Development and Peace having to cancel some projects and make changes to funding protocols to ensure all its partners aligned with Catholic values.