Opinion
Editorial



Attendees at the 2016 Student Leadership Summit in Denver enjoy music from Matt Maher and the FOCUS worship team. (Courtesy of FOCUS)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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In a March 19 essay in the international edition of the French Catholic newspaper La Croix, church historian Massimo Faggioli offers important insights about the role of

special interest groups, influence and money in the life of the church today. In "The tensions between church reform and pushing an agenda," Faggioli writes:

FOCUS: A three-part series

In the run-up to the Synod of Bishops on young people in October, there has been much talk about young Catholics and their connections — or lack of connections — to the Catholic faith. But one national ministry has had massive success reaching out to college-age Catholics: the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, or FOCUS. In this three-part series, national correspondent Heidi Schlumpf takes an in-depth look at this organization.

- **Part 1:** FOCUS' emphasis on the new evangelization
- **Part 2:** FOCUS' substantial financial resources and connections to conservative organizations
- **Part 3:** FOCUS' plan for expansion into parishes

> *In the tradition of the church, reform has been driven mostly by the urgent need to correct serious deviations (for instance, simony and corruption) or to respond to new threats facing the church (such as the Holy Roman Empire's challenge to papal authority). Ideas and projects for reform came more from certain such experiences within the church and less from the circles of professional reformers. …*
>
> *One of the major changes we've seen in the last several years — not just in politics, but also in the church — is the growing influence of advocacy groups, lobbies and think tanks. …*
>
> *Backed by big money, special interest groups, informal networks and invisible actors are today penetrating and influencing more and more institutions, including the church.*

Faggioli told NCR much the same thing about a year ago when we ran a story detailing how the Knights of Columbus spends its money to gain influence in the church and the world of conservative politics. In an accompanying editorial, we asked: "What bishop is going to buck this all-purpose, ecclesial ATM machine? This modern phenomenon within the church, so benign in outward appearance, deserves

deeper scrutiny. Money buys access and influence. That's not the way a Christian community should work." (See here.)

We raised similar questions about an October conference at the Catholic University of America called "Good Profit," hosted by the university's Busch School of Business and Economics and the Napa Institute. At the event, Timothy Busch, who is chairman and co-founder of the Napa Institute and whose name is attached to the business school, welcomed Charles Koch, an outspoken libertarian as well as a major funder of the business school and many conservative political causes, to address Catholic entrepreneurs on the nobility of creating profit for the benefit of individuals and society.

The Napa Institute, the Knights of Columbus, Legatus (an organization of wealthy Catholic executives founded by Domino's Pizza magnate Thomas Monaghan), Chiaroscuro Foundation (founded by New York hedge fund honcho Sean Fieler), and the media powerhouse EWTN are among an intertwined network of organizations that Busch calls "Catholic NGOs."

To that list, we would add the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, which NCR national correspondent Heidi Schlumpf profiled recently. The story "Big money, conservative connections" provides a picture of how these groups are interconnected through funding networks and a social network created when members of different organizations sit on each other's boards and advisory panels.

Busch is very deliberate in his intentions for these groups.

"The evangelization of our country is being done by private foundations, Catholic NGOs, like Napa Institute and Legatus," he said at the event at Catholic University. He described Catholic nonprofits, most of which have no formal or canonical relationship with the church, as "tethered to the church through a bishop" and in that way, he said, "they're following the magisterium of the church. But they have access to capital that the church doesn't."

We ask again: "What bishop is going to buck this all-purpose, ecclesial ATM machine?"

FOCUS has already made inroads into campus ministry programs around the country and has plans to expand much further. FOCUS also has bigger plans; it has raised its sights beyond just campus ministry. It wants to send its missionaries into parishes.

This could create quite the temptation for cash-strapped dioceses, but we would argue that dioceses should resist this temptation. This is no way to staff parishes.

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First of all, as Schlumpf's story points out: FOCUS missionaries may be hired by the pastor with the approval of the local bishop, but they are employees of FOCUS and report to FOCUS superiors. They may be, in Busch's language, "tethered to a bishop" but they are, deliberately, outside formal church structures.

Secondly, there are tens of thousands of professional lay ecclesial ministers with degrees from accredited institutions ready to serve in parishes. Many are unemployed. Many are underpaid. The church should make sure that these highly qualified and committed individuals are employed and paid just wages before seeking alternatives to staffing a parish.

Bishops in dioceses and archdioceses large and small are hard-pressed to meet budgets and pastoral needs. We understand that and don't want to downplay the difficulties involved in running the business side of church structures. But we also don't want to see bishops outsourcing evangelization.

Our words from a year ago still stand: "This modern phenomenon within the church, so benign in outward appearance, deserves deeper scrutiny. Money buys access and influence. That's not the way a Christian community should work."

A version of this story appeared in the **April 20-May 3, 2018** print issue under the headline: Resist outsourcing evangelization.