Opinion
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Ralph McCloud (second from left), then- director of the U.S. bishops' Catholic Campaign for Hu

Ralph McCloud (second from left), then-director of the U.S. bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development, participates in a panel discussion on the debt ceiling May 31, 2023, at Georgetown. John Carr, co-director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, is at center. Also pictured are Jim Wallis, Franciscan Sr. Robbie Pentecost and Michael Strain of the American Enterprise Institute. (OSV News/Georgetown University/Lisa Helfert)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The Pillar published an article April 26 about the resignation of Ralph McCloud as executive director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the anti-poverty arm of the U.S. bishops' conference. The article was unsigned and relied on sources "close to the conference," and linked McCloud resignation with what it termed "acute financial troubles for CCHD."

Unfortunately for The Pillar, their sources do not appear to know very much about how the U.S. bishops' conference operates when it comes to finances. Who knows if they had an agenda in making the assertions they did?

Here are the key paragraphs:

> According to several sources close to the USCCB, McCloud's resignation comes amid acute financial troubles for CCHD, which has reportedly dwindled its cash reserves by conferring grants beyond its own financial resources.
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> "CCHD is in a difficult situation, because it's been giving out more in grants than it takes in," one source close to the conference told The Pillar. "It's becoming clear that's not sustainable."

Do they think McCloud went on a spending spree? Did he write the CCHD budget on a cocktail napkin?



Ralph McCloud, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development, has resigned. He is seen Sept. 15, 2021, during a "CCHD and Worker Justice" webinar sponsored by the Catholic Labor Network. (CNS screen grab/YouTube/Catholic Labor Network)

"In my experience at the USCCB, financial, budget and spending decisions are part of an elaborate process of review, approval and monitoring," John Carr, a longtime executive at the bishops' conference told me. "The bishops' anti-poverty program

should probably not have many millions in reserve; the funds we contribute to CCHD should be put to work seeking justice in low-income communities across the nation. The suggestion that Ralph on his own, or improperly, reduced the reserves of CCHD and that this now represents a financial crisis is not credible."Pat Markey, another former conference executive, explained the process to me in detail.

"Each year, the CCHD pays the conference overhead and rent, and a few other expenses. Then they give away the rest in grants," Markey explained. "The accounting office gives McCloud the figure for what they can dispense. There is a long-term reserve fund, but CCHD has no access to it. They have to ask the Budget and Finance Committee if they can dispense money from the reserve funds."

Markey recalled the Home Missions Office asking to draw money from the reserve fund after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and that it was approved by the administrative committee of the conference, but the office still had to replenish the reserve fund in the next several years. The article is "basically laying the blame on Ralph McCloud" but that is simply not how the system works, Markey explained.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development relies on a second collection and the Pillar article notes that those collections were hit hard by the pandemic. They failed to note that according to the U.S. bishops' conference figures, the only national collection that continues to bring in more than the CCHD collection in post-pandemic years is the collection for retired religious. The people in the pews give more to CCHD via national collections than they do for Catholic Communications; the Home Missions Appeal; Aid to the Church in Latin America, Haiti, and Eastern Europe; and Catholic Relief Services. The people in the pews know that fighting poverty is doing the Lord's work.

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"Ralph McCloud is an extraordinary and beloved leader in the church's social ministry," said Carr. "As director of CCHD, he has been a faithful leader in advancing the Gospel and the principles of Catholic social teaching, lifting up and empowering those who are poor, and offering help and hope in low-income communities. He

deserves our respect and gratitude for his many years of service to the USCCB and the church."

Catholic Campaign for Human Development has funded projects like the Café Reconcile in New Orleans, which helps train young people in food service. CCHD's Social Purpose Enterprises help low-income individuals overcome barriers to job training. Another program helps community-development financial institutions that serve otherwise underserved Native populations.

CCHD annually confers the Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership award to a young Catholic engaged in anti-poverty work. Last year, the award went to Ivonn Rivera from the diocese of San Jose, California. She organized 250 members of her parish to insist that city officials create crosswalks for children in her poor neighborhood after a child was hit by a car.

McCloud once told me about another project the CCHD had supported. A bus line stopped about a quarter mile shy of the grocery store in a poor neighborhood. When it rained, the bags got wet and broke. The community organized to get the municipal government to extend the bus line. If you have ever relied on public transportation, you know that little things like that are not little.

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The CCHD was the target of a campaign more than a decade ago from the fringiest of pro-life groups, the American Life League and the Lepanto Institute. They alleged CCHD cooperated with pro-abortion groups. "The closer we look at the Bishops' Conference [staff and programs], the more we find a systemic pattern of cooperation with evil," said Michael Hichborn, then the lead researcher at the American Life League, at the time. Clearly, he did not understand the church's teaching on cooperation with evil.

The U.S. bishops' conference nonetheless inaugurated a review of CCHD funding and set in place new safeguards, but the criticisms continued, exposing the fact that something more sinister was involved.

EWTN ran two documentaries attacking the founder of community organizing, Saul Alinsky. He was a Marxist and a radical, but one who was friendly with Jacques Maritain, the most influential Catholic philosopher of the 20th century. At one point

in the trailer, the voiceover cites some of Alinksy's more outrageous comments, but nothing compared to, say, Thomas Paine: "All life is warfare. The end justifies almost any means. Rub raw the sores of discontent. You do what you can and clothe it in moral garments." Photos of Fr. Michael Pfleger, Msgr. Jack Egan and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin flash on the screen. Subtle.

It is impossible to know if The Pillar was a willing accomplice in the hit job it published, or if it was simply ignorant of the malice and ignorance of its unnamed sources. Ralph McCloud is good people, and it is vital that the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, work he led for so many years, continue. The bishops need to reaffirm their commitment to the important work of community organizing and fighting poverty.