

Bishops' health reform bill lobbying expense remains a secret

Tom Gallagher | Apr. 21, 2010 NCR Today

Writer Joe Eaton wrote a good essay over at the [The Center for Public Integrity](#) [1] Web site yesterday explaining that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the bishops and staff, lobbied Congress on the health care reform bill, but will not disclose the actual amount of money it spent on its losing effort.

So much for the vaulted themes of transparency and accountability by bishops and their conference staff.

There is no reason why religious organizations should be exempt from lobbying disclosure laws and from filing an I.R.S. Form 990. There is no state-church rationale for such exemptions, except for favoritism granted by legislators to give faith-based organizations such exemptions.

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese claims that there must be a "profit" motive that mandates a disclosure and since the church doesn't have one, it doesn't need to disclose.

"Thomas Reese, a Georgetown research fellow, priest, and expert on the Catholic church, said religious organizations do not profit from legislation and cannot contribute to political campaigns, so the danger of corruption is small. 'If there is no danger of this corrupting the political system through the election process, then who cares?' Reese said." It's not clear what Reese defines as "profit."

Yet, funding for the activities of the U.S. bishops conference comes from dioceses, which ultimately gets its money from lay people, as donors. Moreover, dioceses are recipients of major federal government funding from a variety of sources. The church is a government contractor.

And then there is the old boring idea called "stewardship," which to the modern, educated mind, necessarily incorporates real transparency, disclosure and accountability, not providing the minimalist, legalistic requirements and ducking requests for information.

Perhaps one day the U.S. bishops conference will be a leading example of proactive, upfront disclosure of financial information, which would only contribute mightily to its public integrity.

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[1] <http://www.publicintegrity.org/blog/entry/2040/>