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The Real Problem With the CCHD Guidelines

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Distinctly Catholic

I have already written to defend the new guidelines governing the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, and the CCHD itself, from critics who charge it has compromised the Church's identity by funding groups that, while not pro-abortion or pro-gay marriage themselves, belong to coalitions that promote an agenda that is at odds with the fundamental teachings of the Church. It is clear to any fair-minded person that the charges are baseless.

During my reporting on the CCHD and its critics, one comment stuck with me. Deal Hudson, one of the leading critics of CCHD and currently the editor of InsideCatholic.com and formerly the editor of Crisis magazine, asked why so many community organizing coalitions are pro-abortion in the first place, why so many of them stand at odds with the Church on the hot button social issues of the day, even if those positions are not part of their principal mission or agenda, and so, not in violation of the CCHD guidelines. It is a fair question, one the new CCHD guidelines addressed, thoroughly from my perspective, insufficiently from Hudson's.

My immediate response to Hudson was that when the National Review has its Caribbean cruises with policy experts, they usually do not include an expert on poverty. That is to say, if you are deeply concerned about the plight of the poor, if you take the words "and the warnings" in the 25th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew to heart and wish to care for the "least of these my brethren," there are not a lot of places or people among those who inhabit the political right where you will find guidance. Last time I checked in with Mr. Beck and Mr. Limbaugh, community organizers were a threat to civilization after all, and conservative politicians risk the ire of Mr. Beck and Mr. Limbaugh at their peril. Ask Mike Castle.

How the political left came to adopt its knee-jerk position on abortion, and latterly on gay marriage, is a complicated tale. You can buy my book if you want the long version. But, it is undeniably the case that in

a few short years, a group of generally progressive politicians who sought to care for the poor and marginalized became indifferent to the rights of the unborn. There is no denying it. I have had the experience of being at a dinner or a social gathering when the conversation turns to these issues, and I have voiced my agreement with the Church, only to meet by stares of disbelief or smirks of disgust, as if defending the right to life of the unborn is akin to denying the heliocentric universe. In those situations, I try to find an explanation for my position that will invite my interlocutors to re-examine their own bias on the issue, for example, pointing out that one of the historic tasks of liberalism in America is to give voice to the voiceless, and that defending the unborn seems to me to fall squarely within that liberal tradition. Invoking the authority of the Church in such a situation is of no use if one's interlocutor is not Catholic and if, like most Americans, he or she is suspicious of authority to begin with.

I am always grateful for those moments. They are tense, to be sure. My defense of the Church has never caused anyone to drop their glass, but there was a dropped fork at a dinner in Cambridge, and there have been many dropped jaws. I try and make sure that before the social engagement ends, I turn the conversation to a point of general, liberal agreement. I want those who think my pro-life stance bizarre or retrograde or reactionary to leave knowing that someone who shares their general worldview nonetheless differs on this issue, that not all pro-life advocates are right-wing crazies or women-haters. I want them to know that someone who is pro-life is also pro-union, and usually more pro-union than anyone else they know. In short, I approach these moments as an invitation to witness to the faith.

In the world the CCHD critics wish to achieve, there would never be such opportunities to witness to the faith. I do not see how we can ever convince others of the rightness of our position if we refuse to ever even meet with them. I suspect our witness to our beliefs about the dignity of unborn human life has a greater chance of gaining a hearing from those with whom we have just worked on a common enterprise on behalf of the poor. Take the case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. These men, and they are almost exclusively male farm workers, come to the fields of Florida to eke out a living. They send the money back to their families. They have images of the Virgin of Guadalupe above their bunk beds. They do not miss Mass. I fancy that when they enter a room full of community organizers, they do so with incredible "street cred" on social justice. And if, either in formal discussions or in the kind of informal conversations that accompany such meetings, the issue turns to abortion, I am quite confident that they could ably explain themselves, their love for their families, their sense of life as a precious gift, their devotion to the Church, and that such witness would have a greater chance at persuading a mostly secular, pro-choice person to re-examine his views than would, say, an argument from Michael Hichborn and the American Life League. Fundamentally, the pro-choice position comes down to a belief that no adult's lifestyle should be compromised by an unwanted pregnancy, and the most effective way to combat that easy concern for an easy lifestyle is to present it with an alternative vision of an uneasy life, a life of relentless hard, manual labor, that nonetheless sees every pregnancy as cause for joy, and which values the possibilities of new life over the easy comforts of childlessness.

I understand the concern about Catholic identity. I understand that the bishops should be reluctant to fund, however remotely, groups that are aligned with other groups that may promote views antithetical to the Church's views. But, I also worry that there is a dark side to the concern with Catholic identity. I worry that it too often issues in a defensive posture, which is unattractive in any event, and which can quickly reduce itself to a Manichaean posture, an "us vs. them," in which persuasion has no role, let alone any chance at success. But, the deeper worry is that this concern for the purity of Catholic identity will actually rob the Church of part of that identity, the need to evangelize. If Catholic groups that help the poor are forbidden to engage with anyone who does not already agree with us, how will we ever convince our fellow citizens to become pro-life too?

One of the things I have learned by helping out at my parish's RCIA is that, in explaining my faith to

others, I strengthen my faith. I always tell the RCIA class ? they think it is we who are helping them, but it is really the reverse. It is not only the honesty of their questions and their suspicion of pat answers. It is that the act of evangelization is itself integral to my own Catholic identity.

There is a need for guidelines. But, my greatest difficulty with the CCHD critics ? and with the CCHD?s new guidelines ? is that there must be room for a sniff test. Whether it is the local Catholic Conference or the local bishop, someone needs to be able to say: ?The Immakolee workers are pro-life, and pro-Church, and they can go anywhere they want to get help in their fight for a just wage. We don?t have to worry about them ?helping the enemies of the Church.? They are evangelists. Send them to the gentiles of our day! This will not satisfy the critics, of course, who only appeal to the authority of the bishops when the bishops already agree with them. But, we should all be mindful that the concern with Catholic identity can, in fact, rob us of that identity. We are called to help the poor. We are called to defend life. We are called to evangelize. But, if we are only talking with ourselves, we are not doing any of that and our identity, however rigid and clear and unadulterated, has become a dead thing unworthy even of a Christian burial.

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