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Editorial: Questions about religious liberty campaign's finances not personal

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

When a reporter recently asked Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore what groups and individuals were funding the U.S. bishops' religious liberty campaign -- including their vaunted Fortnight for Freedom campaign, which many see as a thinly veiled campaign against President Barack Obama -- he acted as if the question were a personal affront.

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Lori, who heads up the bishops' religious liberty effort, has gone to great lengths to argue that the campaign is not partisan, that it is not intended to bring down a president and that it is in service of far more high-minded ideals than election-year politicking.

All of that may be correct, but the question, not an affront, stands: Who's paying for this extravaganza?

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, papal nuncio to the United States, endorsed the Fortnight for Freedom in an address to the bishops during their spring meeting. But even he allowed that taking up such an initiative during an election year makes "interventions even more delicate."

Indeed. Lori and others who are acting as if their cathedrals are about to be taken over and turned into state centers for the abolition of religion owe it to the public, Catholic and otherwise, to tell us who's paying the bills for this unusual undertaking.

When *NCR* reporter Jerry Filteau, who has logged an incalculable number of hours over decades covering the U.S. bishops, observed that a common understanding is that the Knights of Columbus were providing a bulk of the funding and that it might be seen as partisan, Lori termed the question "sort of an injustice."

It's no injustice at all, merely a logical question to ask of the bishops as they attempt to mobilize as many as possible to back the contention that religious liberty in the United States is at great risk.

The fact of the matter is that Supreme Knight Carl Anderson took up residence in one of the most extreme corners of the Republican Party, as a legislative aide to North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, during the 1970s and 1980s. He spent 1983-87 in various capacities in the Reagan White House. It is logical, then, to presume that conservative Republican views still inform his political outlook. It is a presumption with contemporary evidence. In a recent issue of the organization's magazine, *Columbia*, Anderson showed a taste for rather imprudent hyperbole when he compared the situation in the United States today to the virulent and bloody anti-Catholic period of the Cristero War in Mexico. That the comparison is absurd is not the important point. That the U.S. bishops would align themselves so closely with such absurdity is the deeper concern.

The Knights, of course, can hire whomever the organization wishes. They can print in their magazine whatever they'd like. They can do with their money whatever they wish. They spend a great deal of it on charitable work, and they spread quite a bit of it around to aid bishops (Lori, who is the Knights' supreme chaplain, one year received more than \$250,000 while he was bishop of Bridgeport, Conn.) and millions have been sent to the Vatican.

The organization is not bashful at all about announcing such donations. The Knights should be as forthcoming about what kind of support they're giving the bishops' campaign. For in this case, they are well beyond the bounds of their membership and those whose insurance premiums fill the organization's coffers. They are helping to make a public case.

So should other groups and individuals be open about their involvement. They are all helping to advance the bishops' very serious proposition that religious liberty is under attack. Politicians of the right, especially, have taken up the cause. We hear the phrases and logic repeated by presidential contender Mitt Romney, and at least one conservative Catholic group has grabbed the coattails of the campaign to advance its own anti-Obama agenda.

Lori need not defend or justify the donors or argue any that this is not a partisan effort. What he says of the matter is of little interest. Just release the names of those who are funding the cause and how much they are donating. It is a simple matter of transparency and accountability. The rest of the church, as well as the general public, can draw their own conclusions.

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