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IRS not investigating church politicking

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Despite regulations that prohibit religious groups from overtly stepping into electoral politics for fear of losing their tax-exempt status, the Internal Revenue Service hasn't been investigating politicking by them for the past three years, The Associated Press reported this weekend.

Following a 2009 federal court order requiring the IRS to clarify its procedures for investigating such matters, the agency has since held those audits "in abeyance," according to an IRS official.

"I haven't done a church audit in quite some time," Russell Renwicks, a manager in the IRS Mid-Atlantic region, said Oct. 18 at a Washington seminar on tax-exempt organizations, according to the report.

"There were one or two ? what I'd call somewhat, maybe potentially egregious cases ? where I thought maybe, we need to go out there, but even those were put in abeyance until we get the signature issue resolved."

Coverage of Renwicks' comments comes at the end of an election season in which Catholic bishops have been particularly vocal in highlighting the issues they think should determine Catholics' votes, sometimes giving Catholics few, if any, options for whom to support.

In one case, Peoria, Ill., Bishop Daniel Jenky ordered priests in his diocese to read a letter at all Sunday Masses accusing the Obama administration of an unprecedented "assault upon our religious freedom" and implying that Catholics who vote for Democrats who support abortion rights are like those who condemned Jesus to death.

In another case, Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J., warned Catholics in a Sept. 15 pastoral letter that disagreement with the church's official teaching on same-sex marriage "seriously harm[s] their

communion with Christ and His Church."

Renwicks' comments also come after publishing of a report on the political contributions of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization otherwise known for its wide-ranging charitable work.

The Knights have donated some \$6.25 million directly to efforts to oppose same-sex marriage across the country since 2005 and have donated some \$9.6 million during that time to other related efforts, according to that report, released Oct. 18 and commissioned by a coalition of Catholic groups that support same-sex marriage.

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