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Activists mobilize around White House's Catholic 'hate group' petition

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

The White House's novel online system for allowing citizens to petition the administration on any number of causes has led to various unintended consequences: petitions to secede from the U.S. following President Barack Obama's re-election; a petition for Vice President Joe Biden to star in a reality show; and a petition for the government to disclose its secret archives on extraterrestrials.

Now there is a petition to designate the Roman Catholic Church as a hate group for its opposition to gay rights, and it may wind up generating almost as many press releases as signatures.

The "We the People" petition was filed Christmas Day and was prompted by Pope Benedict XVI's Dec. 21 year-end address to Vatican administrators in which he denounced gay marriage as a threat to Western civilization.

The petition blasts Benedict for "hateful language and discriminatory remarks" and for implying "that gay families are sub-human." The petition says that as a result of those remarks, the Roman Catholic Church "fits the definition of a hate group as defined by both the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League."

As of Wednesday, the anti-Catholic petition had garnered just under 2,600 signatures, well short of the 25,000 signers it needs by Jan. 24 to reach the threshold for consideration by an administration officials. (The federal government does not designate hate groups; it only prosecutes certain hate crimes.)

But conservative Catholic media and activists were already leveraging the petition to highlight their opposition to Obama.

On Friday, Catholic News Agency published a story quoting Peter Sprigg of the Family Research Council -- which gained notoriety when it was designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2010 -- saying the petition reveals an "underlying agenda" to "stigmatize any disapproval of homosexuality at all and essentially to silence us."

Catholic Advocate, a lobbying group with ties to the Republican Party, followed up with an email blast later that day citing the petition and asking for emergency donations to "help us launch an all-out campaign against the Obama Administration's hateful, secular agenda."

And Thomas Peters, a conservative activist who blogs at CatholicVote.org, asked that the White House "declare once and for all that it does NOT consider the Catholic Church to be a 'hate group.' "

The Anti-Defamation League also responded, with national director Abraham Foxman calling the petition's claim "an outrageous and offensive conceit" and saying it was "irresponsible for the promoter of this petition to use our name."

The originator of the petition is only identified on the "We the People" website as "Zach N" of Atlanta.

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As of Friday, "Zach N," however, had a counterpart of sorts in "Patrick T," who started another petition demanding that the "bigoted" people who signed the petition demanding that the Catholic church be listed as a hate group should themselves be designated as a hate group. So far, the counter-petition has generated fewer than 1,500 signatures.

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