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Catholic Campaign for Human Development under threat

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NCR Today

A new report published Tuesday sounds the alarm about a form of Catholic McCarthyism threatening the future of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). Faith in Public Life, a Washington-based organization of religious progressives, issued this 24-page report by John Gehring, laying out threats to CCHD from right-wing groups who seemingly want to put it out of business.

According to the report, which documents several specific cases from different parts of the country, CCHD funding has been denied to or pulled from groups that work on behalf of the poor, immigrants, and others. The funding has been denied not because of what these groups do or how they want to use a CCHD grant but because of who they are affiliated with in local coalitions. It seems that some groups in these local coalitions might favor same-sex marriage or contraception or reproductive rights generally. This is a case of "guilt by association." And the authors of this report are right: Sen. Joe McCarthy of 1950s fame would have applauded such efforts.

Who are these "McCarthy era" organizations? The report says much responsibility rests with the American Life League, an organization based in Stafford, Va., that claims to be the largest grass-roots Catholic pro-life organization in the country. Its budget is reportedly about \$6 million per year.

In 2009, this group launched the "Reform CCHD Now" coalition, which now boasts about two dozen supporting groups, including Human Life International, ChurchMilitant.TV and Catholic Advocate. The report characterizes these activists as part of an "increasingly aggressive movement of Catholic culture warriors who view themselves as fighting for a smaller, 'purer' church."

But their priorities are clearly out of line with those of Pope Francis, who has given priority to working

with the poor. David Gibson, who wrote a piece on this for Religion News Service, quotes retired Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza of Galveston/Houston: "I'm confident that if Pope Francis knew about the CCHD program he would say, 'God bless the American bishops!' for doing what they can to help the poor." Fiorenza is a former USCCB president who was heading for a closed-door meeting of the American bishops as he spoke.

But I am left wondering: What is the agenda behind these attacks? Is it a concern about abortion or same-sex marriage or even a purer church? Or is it really a desire to squelch the social teaching of the church and its concern for economic justice? Is it born out of an ethic that devalues the common good and sharing with the poor?

Whatever the motive, these groups are certainly out of step with the Gospel -- and now, with Pope Francis.

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