The Campaign for Human Development: Time to Shut it Down?

Oct 17, 2011

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In dioceses across America, bishops send out lists of collections that are to be taken up in individual parishes throughout the year. Some are local, but many are promoted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. There are, for example, Peter's Pence, Missionary Sunday, and the Retirement Fund for Religious. One of these, the lesser-known Campaign for Human Development, has been such a cause for concern that in 2008 the American bishops began to question how it works and even suggested phasing it out. At the 2010 national meeting of U.S. bishops, Roger Morin of Biloxi publicly apologized for the program's past mistakes. So what, precisely, does the CHD do? To answer that question, it might help to examine how the CHD got started, what its original purposes were, and how have things changed.

As Lawrence J. Engel relates in "The Influence of Saul Alinsky on the Campaign for Human Development" (Theological Studies, December 1998), to which this article owes a large debt, the CHD began in 1969 as American cities were burning down: Newark, Washington, Detroit, Los Angeles. It was the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War protests. Some scholars believed the nation was on the road to anarchy. The patriotism of the young during the Kennedy era was gone, replaced with: "Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids have you killed today?"

According to Engel, Bishop James Malone, former President of NCCB, identified two pivotal forces of the times that moved the bishops to inaugurate this campaign: "The crisis of human needs and aspirations with a particular urgency in American society and the impact of the Second Vatican Council."

First, what Bishop Malone politely described as the "crisis of human needs and aspirations" was actually (if you lived through it) an America that was at enmity with itself. And the second force behind the CHD, "the impact of Vatican II," became nothing less than a call for lay Catholics to assume a new Church role (no longer "pray, pay and obey") and a new concept of priestly ministry, described in Gaudium et Spes as identifying with the "poor and afflicted in any way."

But there is another part of the story of the CHD's origins that is often left out of official narratives. It centers in opaque respects around Saul Alinsky, who developed community organizing in a way that met the spirit of the age: strident, threatening, and prone to shakedown. Thoroughly anti-authoritarian, he ostensibly promised to show priests and laity how to follow the call of Vatican II. His pitch: "With your (Catholic) money and my ideas, we can go a long way."

Alinsky's credentials looked impressive to many new, earnest 'social justice Catholics.' Cardinal Stritch gave Alinsky $30,000 a year for three years to study Chicago's racially troubled neighborhoods. Even Jacques Maritain got caught up in the maelstrom, became his friend, and introduced his ecclesial contacts to him as Alinsky developed the first Office of Urban Affairs in Chicago with a mission to "focus the power of the Church on the problems of the city."

With rising anarchy towards the end of the decade, Alinsky demanded reparations from churches. It

was a shakedown routine that worked well. Many mainline denominations caved. The United Methodist Church, for example, paid out $1.8 million. The United Church of Christ, $1.1 million. What were the Catholic bishops going to ante up? The CHD, that's what.

The circumstances surrounding the CHD were enveloped in umpteen layers, various unknowns, numerous complexities and even contradictions. The CHD was presented to bishops as a sort of marvelous opportunity for Catholics to stand up and be counted. CHD chanelled its funds to organizations engaged in "systemic change." In CHD's own words, it sought to address "the root causes of poverty in America through promotion and support of community controlled, self-help organizations and through transformative education."

All this sounded terrific to newly minted Vatican II Catholics. The Church, under enormous pressure, appeared to be right in the midst of the fight for justice and peace in America. What was not clear to the vast majority of Catholics contributing to the Campaign was that many CHD grants were given to agencies and charities that promoted far-left ideologies and engaged in barely concealed political activism, including the recently disestablished Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and many other groups which supported abortion, homosexuality, illegal immigration, and quasi-socialist agendas. For a wide-ranging survey of the problematic organizations, see either the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' page detailing the use of grant money in recent years or the home page of the Campaign to Reform the CHD.

Few pastors or parishioners had an inkling about the nature of CHD's work. Parishes across the country responded enthusiastically to the very simple idea of helping America become a more just nation. The first collection (November 22, 1970) came to $8.4 million. No bishops' collection had ever been that large. The CHD, initially planned to last only five years, took on a permanent existence, guided with little supervision by an Allocation Committee that had too much money and too little expertise.

It needs to be acknowledged that, at the time, many very good Catholics, filled with more enthusiasm than information, supported, and still do, giving grants to organizations that promote "a systematic way out of poverty." Yet so many hard liners have, since then, worked very hard to make sure that the words "social justice" are synonymous with "community organizing" in the Alinskyite mode and not charity in the traditional sense.

I do not call into question the good faith or integrity of members of the hierarchy involved with CHD. I am old enough to have lived through the civil rights movement and the backlash against the Vietnam War, and know how difficult it was for the bishops of that time to steer the American church through those rough waters. Unfortunately, the pastoral needs of today are very different from what they were forty years ago. Rather than change with them, the CHD has mutated into irrelevance.

When transparency is in place, the CHD seems anachronistic, strangely out of sync with the times and ready to enter its own sunset. It represents, at best, only one view of social justice, and an increasingly marginalized one at that. These are some of the reasons raised here that bishops might consider making it optional or, better, doing away with it altogether.

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