

Catholic Organizations or Democratic Front Groups? WikiLeaks Shines Light on Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good

by Brian Fraga

WASHINGTON — For several years now, critics have assailed Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good (CACG) and Catholics United as front groups for secular progressives by highlighting their connections to each other, the Democratic Party and liberal funding sources. Hacked emails from the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank connected to those groups, and released by WikiLeaks in October, confirmed for many their longtime suspicions that the groups are little more than "Astroturf" Catholic organizations planted to sow confusion among the faithful and to dilute the Church's witness in the public square on issues such as defense of marriage and life. "John Podesta has created these groups with the intention to elect Democrats," said Anne Hendershott, director of the Veritas Center for Ethics in Public Life at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, referring to the former director of the Center for American Progress who currently is Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's campaign manager.

Hendershott told the Register that the WikiLeaks-released emails — in which Podesta allegedly told a liberal activist in 2011 that CACG and Catholics United had been created for a "Catholic Spring" revolutionary moment — vindicated years of her researching and writing critical articles on the groups. "It was hard not to walk around saying to people, 'I told you so,'" Hendershott said. But Christopher Hale, the current executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, told the Register that those emails not only predate his tenure by several years, but also ignore the fact that Catholics in Alliance has spoken out against abortion in the public square, defended religious freedom and been criticized by political conservatives and liberals alike.

"We've challenged the Democratic Party and the progressive movement to be pro-life, to respect the religious liberty of the Catholic Church and other American religions. And we've also challenged Republicans to fight for the dignity of immigrants and to care for creation," said Hale, adding that CACG is not interested in fomenting a pastoral revolution in the Catholic Church. Said Hale, "There is nothing that matters more to me in my life than my faith in Jesus Christ and my love for the Catholic Church. I would never try to undermine it. My colleagues and I would never try to work against it."

Attempts to reach Catholics United were not successful. The group's website has been taken down. A message left at the old email address of James Salt, the group's former executive director, was not returned. A telephone number on the organization's tax documents is out of service.

Formed After Kerry's Defeat

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Catholics United were both formed around 2005, a year after "values voters" emerged as a critical voting bloc in the 2004 presidential election that saw George W. Bush, the incumbent Republican president, defeat his Democratic challenger, John Kerry, a Catholic who supported the right to legal abortion. Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, who has written about CACG and Catholics United for several years, said the 2004 election results moved leaders in the Democratic Party to make inroads with religious voters. Part of that strategy, as purportedly unveiled in the WikiLeaks emails, was to create groups with "Catholic" in their title that would advocate for political issues that align with the Democratic Party platform while advocating for an active government to achieve those ends. "They saw an opportunity to cash in on religious voters on the left," Donohue told the Register. "My problem is these groups were born in deceit. They are not true membership organizations. If you take away the Soros Foundation, the Arca Foundation, the other big philanthropists on the left, they collapse, because they have no real members of their own."

Hale acknowledged that CACG in the past received money from George Soros, a business magnate and philanthropist who has funded liberal political causes for years. Hale said the group has not received Soros' money since Hale joined CACG in 2013 and claimed most of his organization's funding comes from small individual

donations. Hale added that he would not criticize his predecessors for accepting money to further the group's stated mission to proclaim the Church's social teaching in American politics. "Therefore, I'm not going to criticize Catholics institutions that take money from the Koch brothers," said Hale, referring to the conservative business leaders who have funded conservative and libertarian political causes.

Intertwined With Each Other

In addition to controversial funding sources, the groups are deeply intertwined with each other, said Donohue, adding that individuals have alternated between positions at the Center for American Progress and those at Catholics in Alliance and Catholics United, as well as Faith in Public Life, a nonprofit involved in "changing the narrative" about the role of faith in politics by advocating for progressive policies. The group worked to defeat a "Religious Freedom Restoration Act" bill in Georgia.

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good was founded in 2005 by a network of liberal-leaning religious activists such as Alexia Kelley, who served as the Democratic National Committee's religious-outreach director during Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. Kelley went on to serve as a senior adviser and deputy director in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, as well as the Health and Human Services' Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. She currently serves as president and CEO of Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, a network of private foundations and donors supporting Catholic-sponsored programs and institutions.

Staffer for Obama's 2012 Campaign

Hale, who was a staffer on a Catholic outreach committee for President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, does not deny his background in progressive politics, nor that of his predecessors involved in CACG's founding. Hale describes himself as an "orthodox Catholic and a heretical Democrat," and he added that he is trying to help bring Catholicism to the progressive sphere. "We think the progressive movement should be pro-life. We think the progressive movement should be pro-poor and pro-Church," said Hale, who added that politically conservative Catholics should support the pro-life witness of pro-life progressives and Catholic Democrats. "We should all work together to challenge our parties and movements to build a culture of life," Hale said. "We need to spend less time tearing each down and more time building each other up." Yet critics also note that Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good supported passage of the Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature health care legislation, despite criticisms from the bishops' conference that the law lacked important conscience protections, allowed for abortion funding on the state health care exchanges and made the contraceptive mandate possible.

In a 2008 speech, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, who was then archbishop of Denver, criticized Catholics in Alliance and similar groups for trying to "get beyond abortion" as a politically divisive issue. Such a strategy, the archbishop, "involves a misuse of the 'seamless garment' imagery in Catholic social teaching." In Catholics in Alliance's materials and online statements, abortion is often criticized as an attack on human dignity in a seamless-garment-type context where other social evils such as war, poverty, the death penalty, environmental degradation and unjust discrimination are condemned, as well.

Catholics in Alliance also highlights as important issues: income inequality, immigration reform, international peacemaking, development efforts and racial justice, as well as a vision of religious freedom that it says rejects efforts to make it a "partisan wedge" issue. In recent years, the bishops' conference and other religious observers have raised concerns about the federal government's overreach into religious affairs via means such as the contraceptive mandate, opposition that has been framed by liberal activists as a Republican-led "war on women." The controversial Catholic groups' defenders say those efforts represent a new way of communicating the full breadth of the Catholic Church's Social Teaching in the public square beyond the "tired and divisive culture war rhetoric" of the 1970s and 1980s.

Charles Camosy is a moral theologian at Fordham University who sits on the board of Democrats for Life of America. He claimed that, while the WikiLeaks emails show that one or more of these groups "may have a troubling start," their current leadership teams are different. He said those groups remind Catholics that the Church's Social Teachings transcend the country's right-left political binary. "We need a plurality of organizations in the U.S. Church, organizations which represent all different kinds of political approaches that are consistent with the Church's teaching," Camosy told the Register. "Far too often, rightly or wrongly, the Catholic Church's interventions

in the public sphere are understood to be 'conservative' or 'on the right.'" Hale said the alleged hacked Podesta emails are incorrect about the origins and purpose of groups such as CACG. "From the beginning, we have worked with progressives and conservatives to promote the social magisterium of the Church," said Hale, noting that CACG has been criticized by Catholics for Choice, a pro-abortion organization that has been denounced by the U.S. bishops for misrepresenting itself as authentically Catholic, for its pro-life work. "We've long been a thorn in the side of the pro-choice community," Hale said. "They don't like that we're not on board with their agenda."

Other Problematic Areas

But critics point out other problematic affiliations and activities that individuals in the groups have been involved in. For example, Fred Rotondaro, the current chairman of CACG's board of directors, wrote a 2010 article in The Huffington Post — entitled "The World Needs a New Vatican Council" — in which he said that "gay sex comes from God" and declared that "abortion is here to stay" in a pluralistic nation like the United States. Rotondaro, a former senior fellow at Podesta's Center for American Progress, also called for the ordination of women as priests, writing: "I have never seen any rational reason why a woman could not be a priest. Why can't this be openly discussed? Will St. Peter's sink into the Tiber if it is?"

Catholics in Alliance's current board of directors includes other longtime Democratic Party operatives, including Salt, the former executive director of Catholics United who oversaw the Kansas Democratic Party's faith-outreach efforts, including messaging work for Gov. Kathleen Sebelius. Sebelius had been instructed by her bishop — Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City — to refrain from receiving Communion because of her support for abortion rights. And as the Health and Human Services' secretary, Sebelius defended the federal contraceptive mandate. Salt also served on the 2012 Democratic Party Platform Committee.

According to Catholics in Alliance's website, Arthur Fitzmaurice, a senior fellow at Catholics in Alliance, serves as the resource director for the Catholic Association for Lesbian and Gay Ministry, an organization that clashed with Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco in 2012 over the then-Oakland bishop's concerns that the group did not affirm the Church's teaching on sexuality. The goals of groups such as CACG and Catholics United, Donohue charged, is not so much being pro-poor and pro-life as seeking to counter social and moral conservatives and traditional pro-life groups that prioritize the right to life over issues involving prudential matters among which Catholics of goodwill can disagree.

Catholics United's 'Hardball' Approach

If Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good has tried to play a more measured role in public-policy debates, its counterpart, Catholics United, has over the years struck a more partisan and strident tone, especially toward political opponents. Donohue accuses Catholics United of petitioning the IRS in an attempt to revoke the Catholic League's tax-exempt status. "They're not out there just helping people in soup kitchens," Donohue said. "They do opposition research. They're hardball left-wingers, with a Catholic name on them."

Hendershott noted that Catholics United — also founded by Democratic Party religious activists like Salt and Korzen — attacked Church leaders and accused them of bigotry for cutting ties with the Boy Scouts of America after the organization decided to welcome self-identified homosexual scout members. "They've done some really questionable things," said Hendershott, noting that Catholics United harshly criticized the Church's opposition to same-sex "marriage" in 2012, the same year it reportedly received most of its operational budget from Tim Gill, a multimillionaire homosexual activist.

Even before then, Korzen, the former director of Catholics United, appeared on CNN in March 2010 to challenge the Archdiocese of Washington's opposition to a local law requiring employers to grant benefits to same-sex partners. Two months later, Catholics United criticized a Boston Catholic school's decision to deny admission of a child of a same-sex female couple. In 2012, Catholics United also attacked the Knights of Columbus for supporting ballot measures to defend the legal definition of marriage as a union of one man and one woman.

"For them to say they were organized to support the bishops' statement on political responsibility is just the biggest joke of all," said Hendershott, alluding to the groups' tax documents that describe themselves as non-partisan organizations dedicated to teaching the public about the Church's Social Teachings. While adding that Catholics have a duty to address social-justice issues and alleviate poverty, Donohue said he still considers Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good to be fraudulent "front groups." He said, "That is what happens when you're born in deceit."

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Register correspondent Brian Fraga writes from Fall River, Massachusetts

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