

Credible Signs of Christ Alive: Case Studies from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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The Campaign for Human Development (renamed the Catholic Campaign for Human Development [CCHD] in 1998) has had numerous supporters over the years, but it also has had numerous critics. Begun in 1970, CCHD is advertised as the anti-poverty campaign of the American bishops, a campaign that works not by direct aid but by assisting grassroots organizations that address the causes of poverty. CCHD, however, has not been admired by everyone. The Capital Research Center and the Wanderer Forum, for example, have criticized CCHD for funding groups inspired by the social activism of radical Saul Alinsky. Others have pointed to cases where CCHD has funded organizations openly opposed to Catholic moral teaching on abortion “rights” or same-sex activity, for example.

Credible Signs of Christ Alive is therefore a welcome book, certainly for those of us who work in the field for CCHD. (For the sake of full disclosure, I am a diocesan director of CCHD). The book allows the reader to hear a supporter of CCHD provide cases that he thinks are exemplary of its work. Unfortunately, the case studies illustrate the problematic understanding of “human development” that has continued to bedevil the social apostolate of the Church since the Second Vatican Council.

CCHD came into existence in that postconciliar ferment of social thought, shortly after Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter *On the Development of Peoples* (*Populorum progressio*). According to Hogan, CCHD proposes “to confront the root causes and structure of poverty by funding local and regional self-help community-controlled projects” (xi). The chief means of carrying out this confrontation is through “community organizing,” which “is a values based process by which people—most often low- and moderate-income people previously absent from decision-making tables—are brought together in organizations to jointly act in the interest of their ‘communities’ and the common good” (4).

These passages imply two basic assumptions that seem to underlie CCHD’s mission: (1) the root causes of poverty are primarily economic, social, or political barriers imposed upon poor people that, if removed, would allow them to develop; (2) economic and social development demands political power exercised in a highly participatory way.

At times, these assumptions work. The most persuasive of the six cases is the first, where poultry workers in Maryland struggle to obtain better pay and safer working conditions. It is the clear teaching of Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* that workers have the right to form associations that will enable them to be treated with justice. The efforts of the Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance certainly appear to be vindicated by a number of favorable court decisions that made companies such as Perdue and Tyson address wage and safety violations.

On the other hand, other cases cited do not seem to support the assumptions. In Hogan's account of community organizing in East Los Angeles, for example, the community tries to remedy gang violence with neighborhood patrols and petitions for greater police involvement. Yet, what is the root cause of gang activity? Hogan relates, almost as an aside, "The majority of households are led by single mothers" (102). According to a study by the Progressive Policy Institute, the "relationship between crime and one parent families is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime" (cited by David Blankenhorn in *Fatherless America*, 31).

If illegitimacy is indeed a root cause, how can it be addressed by community organizing? One can ask this without blaming the victim—indeed, it is not a matter of assigning blame but rather of identifying where the problem lies and what means are available for its solution. A truly Catholic solution would address the problems in the breakdown of the family. The efforts of Catholics, for example, to promote sexual abstinence among young people are clearly of benefit to the whole community.

The obvious counter to this point is that economic conditions strengthen social conditions; that is, if people are paid justly and can provide for themselves, they will have intact families. In Hogan's account of the Anti-Displacement Project (ADP) of Springfield, Massachusetts, for example, we are introduced to "Lee," who works for a business started by ADP. If it were not for ADP, Lee tells Hogan, "I would be homeless, in jail, or dead." "However," as Hogan reports, "with home and job, he is a caring parent" (91).

It is certainly true that families can and do fall apart because of financial problems. This is true, however, not only of lower income families but also of middle-income families—even rich families. Financial stability is an insufficient means of keeping families intact. More significant are the cultural and moral assumptions about marriage and family that keep poor couples together all over the world, assumptions—such as marital fidelity and parental discipline—that are outside the realm of community organizing.

One can raise this same question in the case study of Camden Churches Organized for People, which sought a remedy for the city's numerous problems through a \$175 million grant in community rehabilitation (57). Here again, it is fitting to ask: Are the lack of city services, and the surfeit of potholed streets, open sewers, and abandoned homes, the root causes of violence and drugs that plague the city? Is the absence of middle-class people and local business a root cause? Certainly, the people of Camden are right to protest the lack of government services, but the problems of violence and delinquency, one suspects, turn on the breakdown of the family. Even if the city government provides all the services possible, it is unclear whether the graver social pathologies would be remedied.

Other cases offer equally dubious solutions to the social problems they present. In Alexandria, Virginia, the Tenant and Worker Support Committee campaigned successfully for a living-wage law for City of Alexandria contract workers, which was passed

in July 2000 (40). Critics of living-wage laws point out that whenever wages are raised artificially above the market rate, unemployment increases. Maybe these critics are right; maybe they are wrong. It is unclear why the American bishops, through CCHD funding, should decide this question without the economic expertise to do so. The charisma of the episcopacy does not allow one to determine the economic consequences of a living-wage law for good or ill. One errs on this point at the expense of lower income workers who go jobless.

Further, the very method of community organizing begs the question of whether political empowerment truly contributes to economic and social empowerment. Some of the case studies imply that political participation enables economic advancement. Hogan's analysis does not seem to take into account ethnic groups who have political power but little economic power (e.g., the inner-city Irish at the turn of the century) and conversely, groups with economic power but no political power (e.g., Chinese and Japanese immigrants, even to the present time). Both the Chinese and the Japanese are particularly interesting groups because many of them have succeeded economically even in the face of blatant political discrimination.

Ultimately, there is the more basic question of what makes the work of CCHD in these six cases distinctively Catholic, a problem recognized tacitly by the American bishops themselves when they added *Catholic* to CHD in 1998. Pope Paul VI made clear that the summit of human development is not economic or social but is rather "the acknowledgment by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality" and faith as "a gift of God accepted by the good will of man, and unity in the charity of Christ, Who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men" (*On the Development of Peoples*, n. 21). The "human development" addressed in these case studies certainly identifies faith as a means for social change but fails to see social change as a means to faith.

One could put the problem this way: Is the Church's social teaching reducible to the promotion of human rights in the sense of modern liberalism? If so, is the development of which the Church speaks merely the increase of economic and political self-determination? Pope Paul VI's teaching allows us to answer these questions decisively in the negative. Hogan's case studies present an understanding of CCHD that remains on the horizontal level of reconciling man with man. The notion of reconciling man with God, the highpoint of human development from a Catholic perspective, disappears entirely.

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