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Bishop David Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, center, votes alongside other prelates June 14, 2018, during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (OSV News/CNS file/Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The U.S. bishops gather for their annual spring meeting in Louisville next week. Or, most of them will. The spring meeting is not as well attended as the autumn meeting which is always held in Baltimore. Which is one reason why [their planned discussion](#) of the future of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development is such a lousy idea.

The press release [announcing the meeting](#) stated:

Over the past several years, including during the pandemic, the CCHD maintained its level of support for those in need, despite a decline in donations. Last year, the CCHD started a review to explore ways to renew the mandate and mission of CCHD. The bishops will spend time prayerfully discussing the best way to adapt to the post-pandemic needs and resources, while at the same time continuing a steadfast commitment to helping the poor and disenfranchised emerge from the cycle of poverty.

That sounds so benign but after the hit piece on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development [published at The Pillar](#) a few weeks before the U.S. bishops' conference press release, it is more likely to be ominous than not. [I wrote about the Pillar story on May 1](#). The Pillar's article began: "The director of the USCCB's Catholic Campaign for Human Development resigned this month, as anti-poverty program faces questions regarding its financial management and ongoing viability." The idea that "financial management" was linked to the resignation was not asserted, but it was implied. The conjunction "as" carries more water than it should.

Consider an article that began thus: "The Princess of Wales still in seclusion as Prince Harry and Meghan Marke continue their struggle with King Charles III." The one has nothing to do with the other. Kate, the Princess of Wales, is being treated for cancer. Linking the two on the page, however, allows the reader to consider the discrete facts as linked in reality, whether they are or not.



A man pulls food out of a dumpster May 19 in San Francisco. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Whoever leaked some of those numbers to The Pillar had to be pretty high up in the U.S. bishops' conference bureaucracy. The fact that the intent of the leak was malicious is obvious because the article misrepresented or misunderstood how the Catholic Campaign for Human Development finances work. As Pat Markey, a longtime executive at the conference explained to me, "The accounting office gives [director Ralph] McCloud the figure for what they can dispense. There is a long-term reserve fund, but CCHD has no access to it. They have to ask the Budget and Finance Committee if they can dispense money from the reserve funds." The idea that any financial mismanagement by the campaign is at issue is ridiculous.

I discussed the right-wing attacks on the campaign, and on community organizing more generally, in my earlier column. My colleague Brian Fraga [posted an excellent article yesterday](#) about the pain the cutbacks at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development are already inflicting and the long history of attacks on the program.

The bishops need to stand up for their own work. When the campaign was started in the late 1960s, priests throughout the country were asked to preach about its work two Sundays before Thanksgiving and the nationwide collection was taken on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving. The work they undertook was explained to the people in the pews, how it would complement the work of Catholic Charities by providing a means for the poor to become agents of their own development. It was a work of social justice, precisely the kind of thing called for by the Second Vatican Council.



A sign is pictured in a file photo at a homeless encampment in Seattle. (OSV News/Reuters/David Ryder)

The backsliding on the forward-looking direction of the council may not stop with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Two sources, one a former U.S. bishops' conference staffer and the other a bishop, have told me they fear an assault on the [Office of Justice, Peace and Human Development](#) may be in the offing. The plan would be to severely cut back staff, if not eliminate the office which serves two committees, one on domestic justice and the other on international issues. It is

led by Richard Coll, who also has been lead staffer on the synodal process. He is highly effective on a range of issues, and that effectiveness might put him in the crosshairs of the same folks who attacked McCloud.

The bishops need to be on alert in Louisville. In 2022, the bishops' conference closed the domestic operations of Catholic News Service and, [as I noted at the time](#), "Several bishops have indicated to me that it was not clear that the complete closing of CNS was what they were voting for last year during the executive session at their fall assembly in Baltimore. ... They told me that they understood there would be cutbacks, but not a complete suspension of operations." The bishops need to be clear about what they are, and are not, voting for this time.

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The bishops' conference may face some tough financial decisions. The bishops know that collections are down, although, as Fraga pointed out yesterday, the collection for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development remains one of the most robust annual collections the conference undertakes. Across the board cuts might be necessary. But balancing the bishops' conference budget on the backs of its anti-poverty program or its justice, peace and human development office amounts to giving Pope Francis the middle finger. More importantly, a bishops' conference with wizened outreach to the poor is like a bishops' conference stripped of its commitment to the defense of human life. Following Jesus Christ demands both, a strong commitment to the poor and an indefatigable defense of human life. This is not, it can't be, an either/or choice.

Fraga and I will be in Louisville writing about the developments at the bishops' conference meeting. I usually do not go to the spring meeting but the stakes are too high this year to miss it. Will the bishops' conference pursue an ecclesial vision of unity, nourished by the synodal process, or will it walk down a more sectarian — and politicized — path? Will the bishops stand up to the fringe groups that have attacked the Catholic Campaign for Human Development or not? Will our commitment to the poor stand alongside our commitment to human life, or will both be compromised by abandoning one?

[Read this next: The US Catholic bishops should stand up and protect their anti-poverty group](#)

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)