

CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC INFLUENCE IN EUROPE

AN INVESTIGATIVE SERIES

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“I would have to accept it because what you are doing is you are breaking the procreation link, you’re actually saying that human sexual function can be used outside of procreation.”

“Contraception does that.”

—John Gunn, national coordinator, CAG

WHERE DO THE CAG CO-FOUNDERS COME FROM?

John Gunn

National coordinator of the Catholic Action Group, Gunn describes himself as a 38-year-old Irish “revert” to the faith with interests in apologetics, evangelising and martial arts. He lists his occupation as an accountant/entrepreneur.

Robert Ian Williams

Williams, secretary of the group, is a convert to Catholicism from Evangelical Christianity, who was, he said, “so anti-Catholic I refused to pray in an Evangelical prayer meeting that was held in the Catholic chaplaincy at my university.”

Chris Walsh

Walsh is the group’s recently-appointed spokesperson. He is a founder and former chairman of the antichoice group, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC).

CATHOLIC ACTION GROUP (UNITED KINGDOM)

At the beginning of 2005, a small but slick conservative Catholic organization, the Catholic Action Group (CAG), was launched in the United Kingdom to fix what it described as a “crisis of Truth in the modern world.” It immediately declared that it would start a boycott of the largest Catholic charity in the United Kingdom, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), in retaliation for its qualified support for the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Subsequently CAG attempted to import a US-style challenge to Catholic voters to ensure support for candidates who met strictly defined and ultra-conservative criteria.

CAG certainly attracted a considerable amount of media in its first few weeks of life. Following the well-beaten path of other conservative groups, it issued several press releases packed with rhetoric but without much substance, let alone any indication that it had any financial or membership support from other Catholics. The mainstream press reported on the campaign with articles in the UK’s main liberal newspaper, the *Guardian*, on the BBC, and comprehensive coverage (including an editorial and a series of letters) in the *Tablet*, the UK-based Catholic weekly. However, despite the hype, CAG’s impact seems to have been negligible. It is a perfect case study in how to make a media success of a smoke and mirrors campaign.

CAMPAIGNS

So far, CAG has been involved in two distinct campaigns:

- The “boycott” of CAFOD
- The attempt to encourage UK voters to vote “prolife” in the UK’s General Election on May 5, 2005

Both campaigns were characterized by hyperbole but very little action. According to CAG’s website, contributing to CAFOD “is a sin” and according to group coordinator John Gunn, “to knowingly elect pro-abortionists, with a given alternative, is a crime against humanity.”¹ However, despite its own high expectations for itself and claims of significant levels of funding and promises of action, CAG has not in fact achieved very much at all. A brief examination of its activities suggests that there is less to this group than meets the eye.

CAFOD CAMPAIGN

The Catholic Action Group was set up after a September 2004 article on condom use and HIV prevention written by a staff member for CAFOD, the official overseas development and relief agency of the Catholic church in England and Wales.² (The article was based on a paper presented at the July 2004 HIV/AIDS conference in Bangkok.) CAG declared itself totally opposed to any education about or use of condoms in efforts to prevent the spread of AIDS, a position that is at odds with mainstream Catholic views. In fact, one recent multi-country poll showed that even in heavily Catholic Latin America, more than 90 percent of Catholics believe that the government should promote the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.³

Claim

During the CAFOD campaign, CAG promised to do three things:

- Write to every parish in England and Wales
- Launch a petition
- Conduct an advertising campaign urging churchgoers to stop funding CAFOD.⁴

Reality

- There are almost 3,000 parishes in England and Wales. At best, CAG sent an email to some 700 priests, of whom about 80 took the trouble to reply and ask that they be taken off the email list. There is no evidence that ANY priest or parish supports the stance that CAG took.
- There is no evidence of any CAG petition, on its website or elsewhere.
- The “advertising campaign” has thus far consisted of one print advert in the 12 February edition of the *Tablet*, stating, “There are no grey areas... the argument is black and white. Want to help defend Catholic Truth? Join us for free.” (The cost of such an advert that size is around GBP300, according to the *Tablet’s* rate card.) And, if the letters page of the *Tablet* is anything to go by, it is likely that donations to CAFOD rose as a result of the campaign. Given the sums of money that CAG claims to have access to, there are many possible outlets in the UK in which it could have placed advertisements, including the newspapers, *Catholic Herald*, more adverts in the *Tablet*, the *Scottish Catholic Observer* and the magazine, *Christian Order*. None of these appear to have been done.

UK GENERAL ELECTION

On April 14, 2005, just three weeks before the UK General Election, CAG issued its Voters’ Guide. The guide was based largely on a similar effort from Catholic Answers in the United States in the run-up to the 2004 US presidential election. In fact, the majority of it was copied directly from that “Voter’s Guide for Serious Catholics.”

(Catholic Answers was the subject of a formal complaint by CFFC to the Internal Revenue Service in the US stating that it violated the law which prohibits tax exempt organizations from explicitly or implicitly supporting specific candidates for office.)

CAG’s guide stated that there were five “non-negotiable” issues—abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning and homosexual marriage—and Catholics must avoid voting for candidates who supported these issues. CAG claimed that the guide was “non-partisan, but is unequivocally pro-life” and warned Catholics of “Eternal Hell Fire” if they deliberately vote against church teaching on the five non-negotiables and remain unrepentant.

Claim

CAG claimed that the guide “will be made available to the UK’s five million Catholics via a national advertising campaign, mailshots, e-mails, hand outs and free download via its website.”

Reality

There is no evidence that this leaflet was distributed at all, let alone widely. In fact, for some considerable time it was not even available on CAG’s own website. A copy is now available there at www.catholic-action.com/downloads/voters_guide.pdf.

In any case, if any Catholics did in fact see the leaflet, it does not appear that they paid any attention to CAG’s advice, with 53 percent voting for Labour and a further 22 percent for the Liberal Democrats. Both parties are considered to be more socially progressive than the Conservative Party, and both support abortion rights.

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WHO IS BEHIND THE CATHOLIC ACTION GROUP?

In November 2004, two men with no track record or history in conservative Catholicism, John Gunn and Robert Ian Williams, issued an ultimatum to CAFOD, demanding that it recant its qualified support for the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by the end of January 2005, or face a boycott. Gunn is a businessman with dealings in the City of London and a self-described “revert” to Catholicism. Williams is a teacher and a convert from Anglicanism. Subsequently they brought on board Chris Walsh, formerly of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children.

John Gunn

In his “biography” on catholic.com, where he has regularly posted CAG materials, Gunn describes himself as a 38-year-old Irish revert to the faith with interests in apologetics, evangelising and martial arts. He listed his occupation as an accountant/entrepreneur⁵ and describes himself as somebody who worked for a hedge fund. Gunn has a Bachelor of Science degree and lists a couple of accounting qualifications, including ACMA (meaning he is a member of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants) and MSI (Dip), denoting membership of the Securities & Investment Institute (a professional body for financial services practitioners in the UK). However, Gunn does not appear in the database of practicing accountants on CIMA’s website.

In his apparent zeal to make up for lost time in the church, he takes a very fundamentalist view on certain aspects of Catholic faith. He said in a telephone interview, “If you accept contraception, if you accept this which I don’t, but if I did I would have to accept homosexuality, I would have to accept bestiality. I would have to accept it because what you are doing is you are breaking the procreation link, you’re actually saying that human sexual function can be used outside of procreation. Contraception does that.”

Gunn claims that CAG received assurances of a six-figure sum for campaigns, but there is no evidence of this money being used in either the UK general election campaign, which is now well past, or the CAFOD campaign, which has run out of steam.

In fact, apart from the basic cost of renting an office in a business park on the outskirts of London, CAG’s only expenditures seem to have been the GBP300 advertisement in the *Tablet*.

Robert Ian Williams

Williams, the secretary of the group, is a convert to Catholicism from Evangelical Christianity who was, at one time, “so anti-Catholic I refused to pray in an Evangelical prayer meeting that was held in the Catholic chaplaincy at my university” and “despised the Catholic teaching of confession to a priest, the belief in transubstantiation, the Mass, the infallibility of the pope and the Church.”⁶ He was a staunch promoter of Alpha, an Evangelical movement within the Anglican church. He is from Wales and has worked as a teacher and for Ecclesia Press, a small publishing house in Bangor, Wales. He has written for a series of conservative and apologetics magazines and websites on his experiences, including *Catholic Answers* and the *Latin Mass Magazine*. He has an MA in theology.

Chris Walsh

Walsh is the group’s recently appointed spokes person. In the announcement accompanying his appointment he is described as “a founder and long time chairman of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC).” He was, in fact, chairman for less than three years of this UK-based antichoice group. He became chairman in very controversial circumstances during a palace coup following the resignation of several leading members after they apparently became disillusioned with the leadership of national director, John Smeaton. One of his first acts as chairman of SPUC was to explain to the UK’s Pro-Life All Party Parliamentary Group why the group was distancing itself from parliament to forge a closer alliance with conservative elements in the Catholic church. The parliamentary group had previously expressed “extreme disquiet with developments within the Society at national level and certain staff changes.”⁷

Mission Statement

“Catholic Action Group (CAG) (Registered as Catholic Action Limited) is an independent Catholic organisation, funded by members’ donations and subscriptions. Its patron saint is the ever loyal and obedient Bishop and martyr for the Truth, St John Fisher. It has been established to defend Catholic Truth nationally in the United Kingdom through action both inside and outside of the Church. Membership is open to all mainstream orthodox Catholics who are fully obedient to the teaching Magisterium with the Pope at its head and ALL Bishops obedient to the Pope.”

The “Catholic Truths” that CAG defends include: [opposition to] “Contraception, Divorce, Women Priests or other contentious liberal views which are officially outside of the teaching Magisterium.”

Website

Most of the content on its website has been copied from other conservative Catholic sites, including *Christian Order*, a UK magazine which seeks the “re-conversion of Catholics” with a demand for “obedience to Catholic doctrine and discipline—to Papal and Magisterial authority” and claims to be a “militant antidote to the secular ‘live and let live’ attitude which has brought the Church low.”⁸

Rather bizarrely, a link on their website to the catechism is from the St Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Picayune, Mississippi, rather than one readily available on the Vatican’s website as well as any number of others.

Other links go directly to conservative US Catholic sites like Catholic Answers, Eternal World Television Network, Catholic News Agency and a variety of Catholic apologetics site, including crownof david.com and memorare.com. Some of the most repeated words on its website are “Coming Soon.”

Members

In a series of telephone interviews with John Gunn, he acknowledged that CAG mainly works with converts and claimed that the group has “five ‘full time/part time’ staff, [and] thousands of supporters up and down the country.” This level of involvement is unusual for new campaign groups in the UK. Gunn refused, however,

to give out any names of board members and there is as yet no evidence that CAG has any members. No women are publicly identified with the group.

According to its website, membership of CAG is restricted to the following (emphasis in the original):

- Practicing mainstream Roman Catholics.
- Fully obedient to the teaching Magisterium with the Pope at its Head.
- **Not** a member of any group which is officially in schism with Rome or opposed to the proper spirit of Vatican 2.
- **Not** living an openly immoral life which could scandalize the group’s activities.
- **Not** in denial of the Holocaust or are **Not** anti-Semitic, **Not** racist or **Not** intolerant of other religions.⁹

Charitable Status

Article 1 of CAG’s Constitution, put on its website in February 2005, states that it “is a non-profit organization, with full transparency on its financial records. It will apply to become a registered Charity, Limited by Guarantee.” As of July 12, 2005, the Charity Commission for England and Wales had not received an application for charitable status—a process that takes about three months—nor had any financial or membership records been made available to the public.

Funding

Gunn is very coy about funding, and given that it costs nothing to become a member, that is hardly surprising. He claimed that CAG had received assurances of a six-figure sum for campaigns, but there is no evidence of this money being used in either the UK general election campaign, which is now well past, or the CAFOD campaign, which has run out of steam. In a telephone interview, he said that he relied on friends in the City of London to fund the group. “I’ll have my campaign budget in front of me. So I’ll call up one guy and say I need to produce ½ million leaflets, are you good for it? And he’ll say how much will it cost? About 10 grand and he’ll say yeah I’m good for that. I call up another guy and say I need to build a website that costs 10 grand. Yeah I’ll do that. I need to do a mail out that will cost 3 or 4 grand, yeah I’ll do that.” In fact, apart from the basic cost of renting an office in a business park on the outskirts of London, CAG’s only expenditures seem to have been the GBP300 advertisement in the *Tablet*.

Reactions

CAG self-righteously declares that “the FULL Gospel only available in the One, True, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is simply not being taught, lived out by example, witnessed or defended adequately.” It lays the blame squarely at the feet of the Catholic hierarchy, who it says is, “at best, weak and, at worst, failing in its duty to the faithful.” In many ways, CAG has positioned itself to be more conservatively orthodox than the hierarchy, choosing a fundamentalist interpretation of Catholic teachings that is not shared by the majority of Catholics in the UK or elsewhere. Indeed, a number of Catholic leaders, including Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor, the leader of the Catholic church in England and Wales, have adopted a more nuanced and compassionate position on the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

With the exception of other ultra-conservative Catholic groups and outlets, there appears to be little support for CAG’s activities. CAFOD is a widely liked and respected charity and there appears to have been little if any fallout as a result of the CAG boycott.

In a BBC interview Bishop Thomas McManis of Brentwood described CAG as “self-appointed guardians” of the type that “it is very hard to have dialogue [with] because they aren’t usually open to reason, or to listening, or indeed to any kind of change.”¹⁰

Robert Williams claimed that the CAFOD boycott “highlighted the first alleged recorded split in the English Catholic Bishops Conference.”¹¹ The reality is somewhat different, with the leader of the Catholic church in England and Wales, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, actually signing a letter explaining CAFOD’s stance to everybody who complained to the charity about its stance on condoms.¹²

Gunn acknowledges that CAG are unlikely to become a mass-membership group. “We might have a minority view. Absolutism is a minority view. Very few people actually believe in absolute truth anymore. That is a fact. The reason they don’t believe in it is because...most people are not well read on the Catholic faith.”¹³ Despite the rhetoric and hyperbole, CAG’s impact so far has been negligible and if anything, has consolidated the qualified support for the use of condoms in fighting HIV/AIDS by those running Catholic development circles.

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Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) is a non-governmental organization with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. CFFC is accredited as an NGO with the European Parliament. CFFC is part of the Catholic international church reform movement, International Movement—We Are Church, and the European network, Church on the Move. CFFC shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women’s well-being and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make sound decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education and advocacy, CFFC works in the United States and internationally to infuse these values into public policy, community life, feminist analysis and Catholic social thinking and teaching.