

The Real Agenda of Catholics for a Free Choice

By William A. Donohue

"I spent twenty years looking for a government that I could overthrow without being thrown in jail. I finally found one in the Catholic church." That is how Frances Kissling, the president of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC), explained her mission to a reporter from the magazine, *Mother Jones*. As the record shows, her rhetoric is anything but empty.

One way that Kissling works to attack the Catholic Church is to challenge

the status of the Holy See at the United Nations. The Holy See is a sovereign state and has maintained a diplomatic corps since at least the 15th century. Kissling is determined to try to convince the 170 countries around the world that exchange diplomats with the Holy See that it is unworthy of such recognition. To that end, she has orchestrated a "See Change" campaign to strip the Vatican of its permanent observer status at the U.N.

"Vatican representatives have misrepresented, distorted and lied about what women want." This is the language that Kissling chose to characterize the Holy See at the outset of the Fourth U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing. Following the precedent she set in Cairo, Kissling sought to remove the Vatican delegation from the Beijing Conference. She failed in that attempt but not in her quest to condemn the pope and the entire Catholic Church.

CFFC is often described as the nation's largest Catholic pro-choice organization. This is twice wrong: it is not Catholic and it is not an organization. It has been openly denounced by

both the Vatican and the U.S. bishops as being a fraud, and it has no members. Funded almost entirely by pro-choice foundations, CFFC is not only an oxymoron, it is the establishment's most persistently anti-Catholic letterhead.

CFFC was founded in 1973, setting up shop in the headquarters of New York's Planned Parenthood office building. Once Roe v. Wade legalized abortion, CFFC joined with the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights, moving decisively to counter efforts for a Human Life Amendment. Its first president, Father Joseph O'Rourke, was expelled from the Jesuits in 1974; he served as CFFC president until 1979. Kissling took over in 1982 and has been responsible for shaping the anti-Catholic agenda of CFFC more than anyone else.

Kissling has long thrived on direct confrontation with the Vatican. In October 1984, CFFC ran an ad in the New York Times titled "Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion." The ad, which was designed and placed through Planned Parenthood, maintained that there were differing "legitimate Catholic positions" on abortion. Such reasoning has become a staple of CFFC thought and informs its approach to Catholicism in general. For Kissling, there can never be enough dissent from the Catholic Church.

The credibility of CFFC hangs on its alleged Catholicity. The media court CFFC because it allegedly offers a contrasting voice within the Catholic community on the subject of abortion. Now no one doubts that there are some Catholics (approximately one-third) who differ with the Catholic Church's position on abortion. The question, however, is to what extent can CFFC be considered a Catholic group? Deny it the status of a Catholic organization and CFFC collapses to simply another player in the pro-abortion lobby.

The following statement is typical of the way CFFC distorts Catholic teaching: "The bishops won't tell you, but CFFC will: There is an authentic prochoice Catholic position." It was due

to misrepresentations like this one that on November 4, 1993, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) released a statement stating, "many people, including Catholics, may be led to believe that it [CFFC] is an authentic Catholic organization. It is not. It has no affiliation, formal or otherwise, with the Catholic Church." The bishops added that CFFC "is associated with the pro-abortion lobby in Washington, D.C." and "attracts public attention by its denunciations of basic principles of Catholic morality and teaching..." And in May 2000, the president of the NCCB, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, denounced the group for its rejection and distortion of the Church's teachings on life issues.

Despite what the bishops have said, Kissling continues to appropriate the Catholic label in descriptions of both herself and CFFC. It is true that at one time she spent six months in a convent. But it is also true that her procurement of abortions, done illegally overseas in abortion clinics that she founded, is enough to merit her excommunication from the Catholic Church.

Kissling herself does not dispute the fact that her identification with Catholicism is based on her own definition of what it means to be a Catholic. "When I say I came back to the Church, I never came back on the old terms.... I came back to the Church as a social change agent; I came back to woman-church." Admitting that she is "not talking about coming back to Sunday Mass, confession," and the like, Kissling asserts that the hierarchy of the Church "doesn't deserve our respect."

Perhaps the most severe blow to the reputation of CFFC came on April 21, 1995. That was the day the National Catholic Reporter printed a letter by Marjorie Reiley Maguire blasting the reputation of CFFC. Maguire, an attorney who is divorced from the ex-Jesuit and Marquette theology professor, Dan Maguire, was for years a prominent CFFC activist. Indeed, she and her radical husband were once the CFFC's poster couple.

But like many others who came of age in the sixties, Maguire began to have second thoughts. Included in her intellectual migration were second thoughts about CFFC and Catholicism.

In her letter, Maguire branded CFFC as “an anti-woman organization” whose agenda is “the promotion of abortion, the defense of every abortion decision as a good, moral choice and the related agenda of persuading society to cast off any moral constraints about sexual behavior.” She explains that it is not the Catholic Church that is “hung up on sex.” Rather it is liberals who are obsessed with sex. Questioning the right of CFFC to call itself Catholic, Maguire said, “When I was involved with CFFC, I was never aware that any of its leaders attended Mass. Furthermore, various conversations and experiences convinced me they did not.”

In spite of all this, the media continue to portray CFFC as a Catholic organization in good standing. Yet even a perusal of CFFC’s literature should be enough to convince anyone that CFFC has no love for the Catholic Church or for any organization that proudly defends the Church. Its 1994 publication, “A New Rite: Conservative Catholic Organizations and their Allies,” lists as “the enemy” groups that range from the National Catholic Conference of Bishops to the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

At the top of the “enemies list” for CFFC is Pope John Paul II. At the time of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, Kissling wrote, “If there is a devil in Cairo, it can only be released by the pope’s obstructionist meddling.” In similar fashion, Kissling stokes the fires of anti-Catholicism by charging that “The Vatican cannot be allowed to set policy for the whole world,” as if the delegation from the Holy See was doing something untoward by simply stating its position as a duly elected member of the United Nations.

Indeed, it is not below Kissling to assert that base appetites motivate the Vatican. For example, the Vatican’s opposition to

abortion-on-demand is not seen as a moral position. Rather its stance "is about money and power, not about spirituality."

Sometimes Kissling resorts to spin, as she did after the papal encyclical, Evangelium Vitae. In this teaching letter, Pope John Paul II decried drugs, war, international arms trade, environmental destruction, overuse of the death penalty, infanticide and experimentation on human embryos, calling them "the culture of death." Kissling's response was remarkable: "What he calls the 'culture of death' is really human freedom, being able to make choices based on conscience." This not only distorts the message of the Holy Father, it shows a hubris that is disconcerting.

CFFC, of course, contends that it is a Catholic abortion rights organization having nothing to do with anti-Catholicism. Yet even its most eloquent spokespersons can't explain why its board members continue to show up on TV shows that deal with issues that have nothing to do with abortion, but have everything to do with discrediting the Catholic Church. Or take, for example, bigoted comments made about people like the late John Cardinal O'Connor. Kissling once said of the New York Archbishop that he is "the kind of man who, if the church still had the power to burn people at the stake, would be right there lighting a fire."

In word and deed, Catholics for a Free Choice is anti-Catholic. That is why it does not deserve to be given a platform of legitimacy by any respectable organization.

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