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U.N. mission

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See Change

The Vatican has sent representatives to the United Nations since its inception in 1945, and in 1954, the Holy See attained the status of "nonmember permanent observer," a status it shares with only one other nation in the international body, Switzerland. In practical terms, it means the Holy See cannot vote in the U.N. General Assembly, but it can participate in U.N. conferences, issuing statements and making its voice heard on various issues of contention.

Since the United Nations generally operates by consensus, the Holy See enjoys some say in how U.N. conferences word various documents. In recent years, various U.N. conferences on population, development and women's issues have pitted Holy See delegates and their allies, particularly Latin American Catholic nations and Muslim countries, against delegations from countries that support artificial contraception, and, in certain cases, legalized abortion. And it's this ability to challenge international efforts to spread the pro-choice/pro-contraception gospel that has earned the Holy See the wrath of abortion and artificial birth control advocates around the world.

Tapping into this wrath, in March 1999, the U.S.-based Catholics for a Free Choice — a pro-choice/pro-artificial contraception group that has no affiliation with the official Catholic Church — launched a campaign called "See Change" against the status of the Vatican's delegation to the United Nations. In pointed attacks on the Catholic city-state in Rome, Frances Kissling, CFFC president, has derided the Holy See's influence at the United Nations.

"Why should an entity that is in essence 100 square acres of office space and tourist attractions in the middle of Rome with a citizenry that excludes women and children have a place at the table where governments set policies affecting the very survival of women and children?" Kissling has stated.

CFFC claims that the Holy See's presence at the United Nations promotes religious intolerance, fundamentalism and attacks on women's rights, as well as limits international family planning efforts, "safe" abortion and emergency contraception for victims of wartime rape. Additionally, CFFC claims that the Vatican indirectly promotes the spread of HIV/AIDS by opposing condom education and distribution.

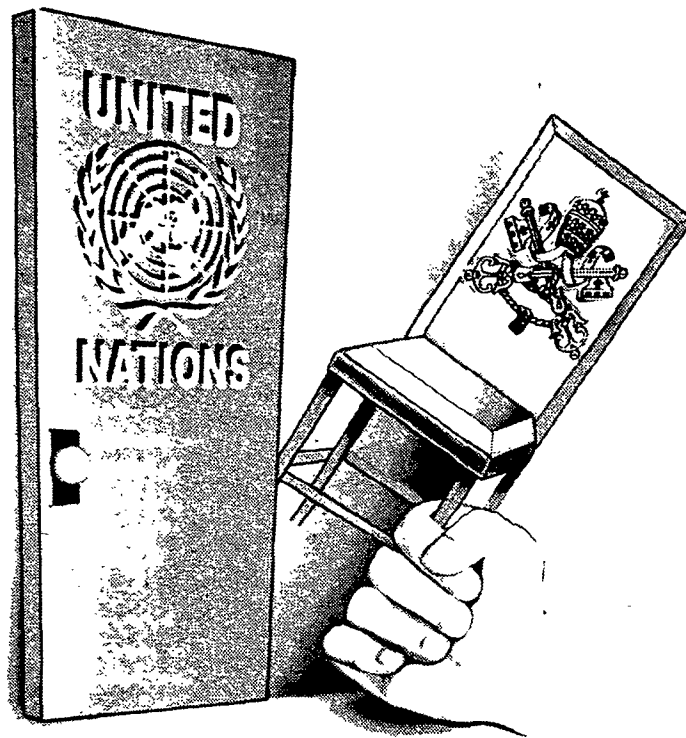
CFFC's campaign has drawn support from more than 450 groups throughout the world, ranging from environmental organizations and some religious groups to feminist groups and pro-choice organizations. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations — USA, Voters for Choice — USA, and Republicans for Choice — USA, are among the groups supporting the move to change the Holy See's status at the United Nations.

The campaign supporters have asked U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to review the status of the Holy See, but the U.N. leader has issued no statements regarding the See Change campaign. For that matter, the official actually has no say in the matter, since it is the member states of the U.N. General Assembly that must move to expel the Holy See, not the body's bureaucrats, noted Elizabeth Bishop, an information officer in the secretary-general's office, in New York City. She added that no member state has introduced any resolution asking that the Holy See have its status changed.

The *Catholic Courier* requested an interview with a CFFC representative regarding the See Change campaign, but none was granted.

See no evil

The See Change campaign has itself been roundly condemned by several



groups, including the U.S. House of Representatives, which voted 216-1 on July 11 in favor of a resolution against the campaign. The resolution was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, a pro-life Republican from New Jersey who was joined in his efforts by pro-life and pro-choice Republicans and Democrats alike, according to Chris Connelly, Smith's spokesman.

"I think all of the members of Congress, regardless of their stance on abortion, just see this for what it is — anti-Catholic bigotry," Connelly said of the See Change campaign. After the resolution passed, the Holy See U.N. mission issued a statement thanking Congress for its vote.

"Congress ... recognizes the Holy See as a sovereign body capable of acting in the international arena, and pays tribute

to the Holy See's contribution to peace and to the promotion of human rights," the mission statement read in part.

Additionally, U.N. members are highly unlikely to support the See Change campaign because the Vatican's voice is valued at the United Nations, according to Austin Ruse, president of the Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute. The independent pro-life institute is based in New York City and works closely with the Holy See U.N. mission as well as the Archdiocese of New York on shared issues of concern, Ruse said in a phone interview.

Unlike all other nation-states, the Vatican is interested primarily in justice and world peace, not its own self-interest, he noted, and its delegation is known for its honesty regarding controversial issues.

"There's no support anywhere at the U.N. for this," Ruse said of the See Change campaign.

He added that his organization is currently lining up support for a counter-campaign that has earned the backing of more than 4,000 nongovernmental organizations worldwide that include evangelical Christians, Muslims, Jews and various pro-life groups. He added that the diversity of support belies the CFFC charge that the Holy See is unfairly allowed a seat at the U.N. table whereas other world religious bodies have no such influence. If that is so, he said, then why do even non-Catholic countries back the

Holy See's presence at the United Nations?

"I think that (non-Catholic nations) see the Holy See as being a voice for truth and justice and not simply an organ of the Catholic Church," he said. If the Holy See did not hold a U.N. seat, such nations would rightly see that their pro-family positions might be in trouble, he added.

The Holy See has also garnered backing from some surprising quarters, according to Smith, most notably Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, president of the European Union, and a Lutheran who heads a nation that has only 7,000 Catholics in a population of 5 million. The EU leader met with Pope John Paul II last November and issued this statement afterward in response to the See Change campaign.

"The Holy See represents a special forum, as it has invaluable knowledge of events in the world, promotes peace, solidarity and tolerance — values to which we attach much importance," the president said. "To those who are displeased with the Holy See's growing influence, the only thing I can say is that I intensely desire that the issues that are part of the Holy See's agenda will spread even further, because we all need peace and solidarity."

In the end, Ruse said, the See Change campaign, if successful, would undermine the very concept of the United Nations, where small nations like Vatican City have an equal place with large ones like the United States. If that means pro-choice groups are unhappy with the Holy See's status, so be it, he noted.

"If the Holy See had been sitting there and making nice, fatuous speeches, this would not have happened," he said of the See Change campaign. "The Holy See cannot be bought. The Holy See cannot be intimidated. So the only thing to do is to boot the Holy See out."

Magazine: FBI tracks bishops, groups

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Two spokesmen for the U.S. Catholic bishops expressed surprise and concern over a recent magazine article that claimed the FBI keeps an investigative database on the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and a number of pro-life and other groups.

Insight, a weekly newsmagazine published by *The Washington Times* daily newspaper, reported in its June 23 issue that it has been rumored for years — "but dismissed as nutty conspiracy theory" — that the federal government "has been assembling an extensive database on pro-life organizations."

Now, the magazine said, it has obtained internal Justice Department documents "that lay out justification for 'intrusive investigative activity' of a number of groups, including the NCCB, the Women's Coalition for Life, the American Life League, the Christian Coalition, Feminists for Life and Americans United for Life.

An update of the June article posted on *Insight's* Web site said: "Indeed, not only does the file on the bishops exist in the criminal database, but there also is information on the late (New York) Cardinal John O'Connor's role in the pro-life movement, as well as information on other groups with no known ties to criminal types or illegal activities."

A few days after the *Insight* article appeared on its Web site, the magazine posted what it identified as two sets of FBI documents, one of which described Cardinal O'Connor as leader of the "broadest, best organized and most powerful of the pro-life groups."

"If such a database does exist, the FBI owes us an explanation as to exactly what they have," said Mark Chopko, general counsel for the bishops.

"Until such time, we cannot comment any further. We have to see the data," he told Catholic News Service.

David Early, senior communications officer for the bishops, said, "We were under the impression that the FBI had ended its surveillance of religious organizations in the 1960s. So obviously we were not aware of it and are anxious to learn more."

Insight managing editor Paul Rodriguez told CNS he received "hundreds of pages" of documents under the Freedom of Information Act and obtained comments from unidentified officials within the FBI and the Justice Department.

In the article Rodriguez said the government has been assembling a database on pro-life organizations under the auspices of tracking potential criminals involved with what the government terms "domestic terrorism" in relation to bombings of abortion clinics.

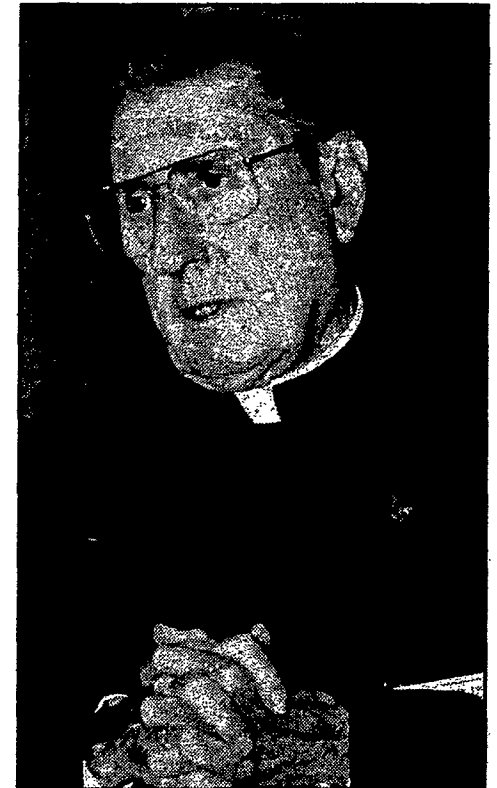
"The Justice Department has admitted such a federal task force exists but has denied it tracks innocent civilians or groups," Rodriguez wrote.

He said the database was put together by the FBI in conjunction with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and other federal law enforcement agencies. He added that the government calls the secret project VAAPCON, an acronym for Violence Against Abortion Providers Conspiracy.

"These never-before-seen records detail not just suspected criminal activities by some factions of the anti-abortion or pro-life movements, but also the political activities, biographies and lobbying efforts of some of the most well known — and law-abiding groups — in the country," Rodriguez wrote.

Catholic News Service submitted a written request to the FBI, asking for a reaction to *Insight's* articles. The agency never responded to the CNS query.

Insight later reported that several FBI and Justice Department officials spoke to



CNS file photo

A Washington, D.C., magazine says the FBI kept tabs on the late Cardinal John J. O'Connor's pro-life activities.

the magazine on the condition they not be identified.

One Justice official said that while it sounds inappropriate to gather information on Catholic bishops and Cardinal O'Connor, it is not uncommon.

"This is done all the time. It's what you do with the information that is important," the official told *Insight*.

When asked by the magazine why the cardinal and representatives of other groups with no known ties to criminal elements would be included in the VAAPCON files, the official said, "I don't know. I have to agree with you that it probably shouldn't be in there."