

USCCB withdraws from human rights group over support of court nominee

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has withdrawn from the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, citing the group's "expanded and broadened agenda" that fails to "reflect the principles and policies of the bishops' conference."

In announcing the withdrawal May 19, Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Peace, pointed to the rights group's support of the nomination of Elena Kagan to the U.S. Supreme Court as the most recent example of how the concerns of the two organizations' have diverged in recent years.

Traditionally, the bishops have been neutral on court nominees, said Mercy Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the bishops' conference.

Kagan, U.S. solicitor general, was nominated by President Barack Obama May 10 to replace retiring Justice John Paul Stevens.

"In light of recent events," Bishop Murphy said in a statement, "it has become increasingly clear that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' continued membership ... is not possible because (the civil rights conference) expanded and broadened agenda.

"The interests of the leadership conference and those of the USCCB have diverged as (the civil rights conference) has moved beyond advocacy of traditional civil rights to advocacy of positions which do not reflect the principles and policies of the bishops' conference," he said.

Bishop Murphy added that the bishops regret having to withdraw the conference's membership.

He reiterated the bishops' long-held opposition to discrimination based on race, religion, sex, ethnicity, disability or age.

"While we cannot continue as a member of this coalition, we will work with those, including members of the leadership conference, on particular issues that advance the bishops' commitment to oppose all forms of racism, unjust discrimination and bigotry," Bishop Murphy's statement said.

Founded in 1950, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights includes more than 200 national organizations and has advocated for the rights of people on a variety of fronts from the death penalty to race relations.