

Catholics for Choice: *Exposed*

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When Catholics for Choice projected pro-abortion messages onto the walls of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception while practicing Catholics were praying inside, it was the most sacrilegious stunt they pulled since its founder stood on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral and declared herself "Her Holiness Pope Patricia the First" in 1973.

The desecration of the Shrine was universally condemned by Catholics. Cardinal Wilton Gregory compared the organization to Judas.¹ Even left-leaning Catholic thinkers and publications, like

America Magazine, called it a shameful act of sacrilege.²

The stunt surely attracted attention, as it was designed to do. But was it a bold act by clever thinkers, or the desperate gasp of a dying organization? Whistleblower complaints from former employees and the organization's tax returns paint a clear portrait of Catholics for Choice as a group in turmoil. The records show that Catholics for Choice has a history of mistreating its female employees and is completely dependent on a handful of wealthy anti-Catholic funders.

A Brief History of the Anti-Catholic Catholic Group

Founded in New York City in 1973, shortly after *Roe v. Wade* was imposed on the nation, Catholics for Choice (originally known as Catholics for a Free Choice) struggled in the seventies and stayed alive only through support from other pro-abortion organizations and a Unitarian-Universalist group in New York City.³ After moving to Washington, DC, Catholics for Choice got their first big check: \$75,000 from the Sunnen Foundation, which had spent years forcing involuntary sterilization on the women of Puerto Rico.⁴ It was the first of many checks from anti-women's rights groups, including the Sunnen Foundation and the **Playboy Foundation**.⁵



FRANCES KISSLING

In 1982, a former abortion clinic operator named Frances Kissling, who had washed out of a convent as a teenager, was named the organization's president.⁶ Kissling said she did not even consider herself to be Catholic at the time

she was named president of Catholics for Choice.⁷ She had spent the years prior setting up illegal abortion clinics in countries like Mexico. In a 2002 interview, she said the best way to start an illegal abortion clinic was to find a desperate doctor who was in some kind of trouble and to bribe the authorities to look the other way.⁸

Fueled by grants from massive corporate foundations,⁹ Catholics for Choice worked to be a thorn in the side of the Church,

encouraging discontent and antagonism against the bishops. In 1984, Catholics for Choice gained new notoriety when it took out a full-page ad in the New York Times in support of abortion in response to bishops' criticism of vice-presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro, a self-identified Catholic. The ad included signatures from a handful of nuns, one brother, and two priests. The Vatican instructed the religious signatories to retract their support of the statement or be subject to dismissal and prosecution under canon law.¹⁰

The group expanded internationally in the 1990s, founding a Latin American arm called Catholics for the Right to Decide with the mission of encouraging abortions of Hispanic babies in heavily-Catholic countries like Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil.

In 1995, one of Catholics for Choice's founding members, Marjorie Reiley Maguire, wrote a letter to the editor of the National Catholic Reporter saying Catholics for Choice had become "an anti-woman organization" whose sole agenda was "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."¹¹ She asserted that its staff was not actually Catholic, writing, **"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."**¹²

Kissling commonly expressed anti-Catholic views, at one point calling the Church "fatally flawed" and saying, "As for the people who come and tell me, 'I'm so glad you're doing this, because you make it possible for me to be a Catholic,' I say to myself, 'Maybe I shouldn't be making it possible for anyone.'"¹³ She admitted she

attended Mass only “occasionally” and mused about joining the Episcopal church, but said “there are so few Episcopalians, it’s not worth it.” Kissling described herself in a 2002 interview as a prophet: “You know, my sense of myself is as prophetess. I am a prophet. It’s corny, but the reality is, that’s what I am. And I view my work in the tradition of the prophetic within religion, and I would be that way wherever I worked.”¹⁴

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In 2000, the USCCB said Catholics for Choice’s claims to speak as an authentic Catholic voice were false.

Kissling spent her years at the helm of Catholics for Choice agitating against the Church itself, bluntly stating that she was engaged in “active resistance against the institution.”¹⁵ In a 1989 interview with *Mother Jones*, Kissling

said, “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.”¹⁶ In 1999, **Catholics for Choice led a campaign to push the United Nations to downgrade the Vatican from non-member state status**, which it chose over full membership so that it would not have to choose sides in war, to a mere NGO.¹⁷ In 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said Catholics for Choice’s claims to speak as an authentic Catholic voice were false, and that “the group’s activity is directed to rejection and distortion of Catholic teaching about the respect and protection due to defenseless unborn human life.”¹⁸

Kissling retired from Catholics for Choice in 2007 and received a large retirement package, collecting \$388,818 from

Catholics for Choice the year after she left.¹⁹

“Extremely toxic...misogyny...bullying”

After Kissling’s departure, the reins of Catholics for Choice were handed to Jon O’Brien, a man from Ireland who had previously been the group’s vice president. O’Brien referred to God in public as “she”. O’Brien took the organization to new heights in terms of fundraising, increasing revenues to a record \$5.9 million in 2016. But five anonymous whistleblower complaints by former employees detail how despite the ballooning revenues, Catholics for Choice was an abusive environment with little support for its female staffers.²⁰

According to one whistleblower, **“There was no trust, so much misogyny, racism, sexism, harassment, screaming, ableism, bullying...a nonstop barrage of workplace abuse and violence.”** The person described how staff were “screamed at and belittled regularly,” and how one staffer was “pushed out for not sharing personal details of their lives that did not affect their work.”²¹

The same whistleblower described Catholics for Choice’s paltry support for working mothers as a self-proclaimed feminist organization. **“Parents, but more specifically mothers, are not supported and not really welcome...Most staff who were pregnant had their babies and left soon after returning,”** according to the complaint.²² Catholics for Choice offered only six weeks of paid leave to new mothers, well below the norm for companies with similar revenues. Another employee said paid leave of any kind was “near impossible to use and highly looked down upon even though certain members of upper management seemed to be fond

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of using theirs with relative frequency.”²³ All of the whistleblowers independently described the work environment at Catholics for Choice as “toxic”.

The complaints also detailed how **O’Brien and upper management took**

home large salaries while pay for lower-level employees started at \$30,000 per year.²⁴ In the timeframe described by the employees, the median rent in Washington, DC for a one-bedroom apartment was \$2,176 per month, which would consume 87% of a base salary at Catholics for Choice.²⁵ One of the complaints said that junior staff needed a second job in order to stay out of poverty in the nation’s capital.²⁶

The complaints detailed constant internal turmoil, with one former employee saying the staff turned almost every year. Another employee described a state of paranoia within the organization, with employees living in fear of being fired for arbitrary reasons.²⁷

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The organization incurred a \$1.4 million net loss in 2019.

O’Brien left Catholics for Choice in December 2019. The exact circumstances of his departure are unclear, but he left at a time when the organization

was in shambles. Revenue had plummeted to \$1.8 million, a 65% year-over-year drop and the lowest figure since 2009. The

organization incurred a \$1.4 million net loss in 2019.²⁸

Amidst the staff turmoil, the board of directors also went through a shakeup in 2020. The chairman of the board, Daniel Dombrowski, an obscure professor from Seattle University, was replaced by Linda Pinto, who leads an organization which agitates for the ordination of women. The shakeup was something of an intersectional purge, as nearly all men were removed from the board.

After paying a headhunting firm to find a new president, the board of Catholics



JAMIE MANSON

for Choice settled for Jamie Manson, a freelance columnist and book reviewer for the National Catholic Reporter. (The Reporter is best known for defying orders from its bishop under canon law to cease using the name

“Catholic”.²⁹) Manson holds a degree from Yale University Divinity School, where she studied under Margaret Farley, a nun who was censured by the Vatican for a book in which she attempted to present a Catholic case for homosexuality, masturbation, and divorce.³⁰ Manson regularly flaunts that she is currently in a lesbian relationship.

The organization was dealt another major blow in 2020 when its Latin American arm, Catholics for the Right to Decide, was ordered by a court in Brazil to remove “Catholic” from its name. Jude Jose Carlos Ferreira said in his ruling, “In defending of the right to decide on abortion, which the Church clearly and severely condemns, there is a clear distortion and incompatibility of the name used in relation to the aims and specific actions of the association, which directly attack morality

and good customs, in addition to harming the public good and interests.” The ruling emphasized that Catholics for the Right to Decide had a “public, notorious, total and absolute incompatibility with the values” of the Catholic Church.³¹

Since Manson took control of the organization, **Catholics for Choice has increased its focus on increasing abortions of Hispanic children** by launching a new Spanish-language initiative.³² They also devote resources to advancing abortion of African children in countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Manson was also the ringleader behind the act of sacrilege at the shrine in 2022. Current employees gloated about what they had done on social media, including the group’s press secretary John Becker, who boasted on Facebook: “So proud of my bold, courageous, badass work family at Catholics for Choice for countering the anti-choice propaganda of the so-called “March for Life” tonight and taking the voice of America’s pro-choice Catholic majority right to the doorstep of America’s flagship Catholic Church (while the National Prayer Vigil for Life was being held inside!). Definitely made my queer activist heart happy to cause good trouble with these wonderful folks!! ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️”³³

Catholics were united in condemning the act. Cardinal Wilton Gregory of the Archdiocese of Washington even said that the Catholics for Choice employees behind the stunt are not Catholic: “Those whose antics projected words on the church building demonstrated by those pranks that they really are external to the Church and they did so at night – John 13:30.”³⁴

(John 13:30 reads, “As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it

was night.” This sentence refers to Judas leaving the Last Supper to betray Jesus and lead the authorities to arrest him.)

Is It Even a Charity?

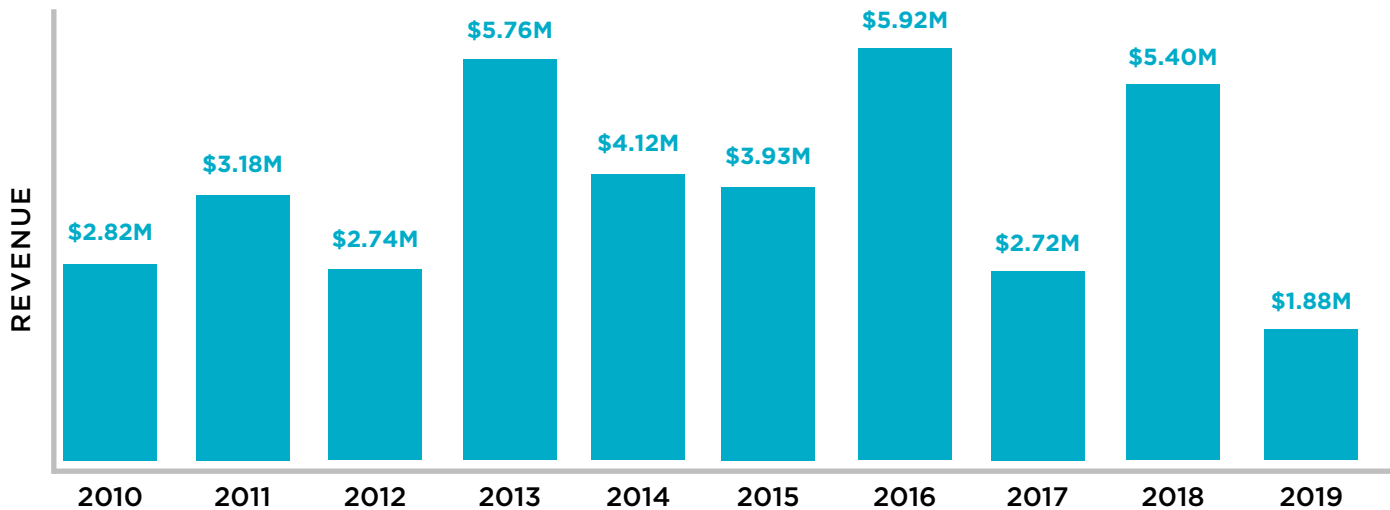
Catholics for Choice has long been propped up by massive corporate foundations, but its financial records demonstrate that it would have to shut its doors completely without the support of a handful of anti-Catholic millionaires and billionaires.

Catholics for Choice’s most recent tax returns filed with the IRS reveal that just 20% of its revenue comes from small donations.³⁵ This number, known as the public support percentage, has been paltry for years. In fact, **Catholics for Choice’s status as a public charity is threatened by how little support it receives from the general public.**

In order to qualify as a public charity and receive the tax benefits that come along with that status, non-profits are required to raise at least 33.3% of their funds from donors who give less than 2% of their overall revenue – in other words, small donations from ordinary members of the public.³⁶ Catholics for Choice has failed this test every year since 2013.³⁷

The IRS allows an exception to this requirement through the “facts and circumstances test”, under which an organization must show that at least 10% of its funds come from the public and that it is able to “attract new and additional funding on a continuous basis.” Catholics for Choice has claimed on tax returns for the last seven years that it meets this test, but their inability to garner more than 33.3% of their revenue from the general public for at least seven straight years raises serious

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE REVENUE BY YEAR



questions about whether they should even be considered a public charity...or just the plaything of wealthy Catholic-haters.

Much of Catholics for Choice's revenue comes from investment income from its massive endowment, which totals \$16.7 million.

“Manson admitted in a 2021 interview with *Inside Philanthropy* that fewer than 600 individuals actually donate to Catholics for Choice.

Almost half of their revenue in 2019 came from dividends, interest, and other investment income.³⁸

While non-profits are not required to disclose the amounts of their donations nor the identities of their donors, Catholics for Choice's tax returns give hints

as to how few supporters they actually have. In 2019, Catholics for Choice claimed \$1,564 in revenue from publications; at the

time, a subscription to their Conscience Magazine cost \$25, indicating that just a few dozen people subscribed to it.³⁹

But one does not need to look for hints in tax returns; Manson admitted in a 2021 interview with *Inside Philanthropy* that fewer than 600 individuals actually donate to Catholics for Choice.⁴⁰ “You can't survive on that,” she fretted. She also acknowledged that the group had lost two major funders. To plug the hole, Manson vowed to find more large corporate donors to prop the organization up.

Catholics for Choice's largest and most consistent funder is the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation, the personal foundation of billionaire Warren Buffett, one of the world's top ten wealthiest men. The Buffett Foundation gives \$2-\$5 million every year to Catholics for Choice and its Latin American affiliate, totaling over \$50 million since the year 2000.⁴¹ Of the hundreds of organizations the Buffett Foundation funded in 2020, Catholics for Choice was one of only five which explicitly claim to have a religious basis. (The few

others describe themselves as interfaith.⁴²) Buffett himself personally identifies as an agnostic.⁴³



WARREN BUFFETT

Buffett's fortune comes from Berkshire Hathaway, a massive conglomerate which owns American household names like GEICO, Duracell, Dairy Queen, and Fruit of the Loom. Portions of the revenue that everyday Americans spend with these companies go to

fund abortion around the world; the Buffett Foundation has given over \$4 billion on abortion groups, including directly to abortionists like Planned Parenthood.

Other recent large funders of Catholics for Choice include the Hewlett Foundation⁴⁴ and Packard Foundation,⁴⁵ each of which were started by the founders of Hewlett-Packard;⁴⁶ the Huber Foundation, an arm of the industrial J.M. Huber Corporation; and the Weeden Foundation, which seeks to reduce the world's population to fight climate change.⁴⁷ Catholics for Choice has apparently lost support from longtime funders foundations like the Ford Foundation, which hasn't funded them since 2015.⁴⁸

Catholics for Choice's financial records also raise questions about what they actually do with their money. In 2019, they spent \$1.5 million on executive and employee salaries (including \$304,000 for their president); \$400,000 on accounting and other management fees; \$440,000 on rent and office supplies; and \$627,000 on travel, conferences, and meetings. That meant 91% of spending was for employee salaries and administrative costs.⁴⁹ Even in 2018 when revenues were near record highs, employee

pay and administrative expenses still accounted for 85% of spending.⁵⁰

Conclusion: A Loud Contradiction

Perhaps the greatest insight into how Catholics for Choice thinks is their description of themselves published on their website:

"Since 1973, we've worked in the United States and across the world to ensure that all people have access to safe and affordable reproductive health care services and to infuse our core values into public policy, community life and Catholic social thinking and teaching."⁵¹

Note the phrasing: "infuse our core values into ... Catholic social thinking and teaching."

Catholics for Choice does not even pretend to support Catholics or the Church. They explicitly think Catholic teaching is missing something essential – their 'core values.' And their core values are spreading abortion everywhere.

They call themselves advocates of women's rights, yet they treat their own women with contempt.

They call themselves a public charity, but they have almost no supporters – except a few millionaires and billionaires.

They call themselves Catholic, but they hate the Church and everything she stands for.

From its name to its mission, Catholics for Choice is, at its core, little more than a loud contradiction: an anti-Catholic hate group.

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