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Philadelphia's Antireligious Cruelty

City officials pushed Catholics out of foster parenting to punish them for their faith.

By Thomas Paul

Nov. 5, 2020 6:41 pm ET



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I try very hard not to take for granted the life I've been given. When I was born, my biological mother couldn't care for my brother and me. We were taken from her and placed in foster care through Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia. We were fostered and then adopted by Cecelia Paul, the woman I called mom. I always say, "Whoever raises you—that's your mother."

But there are children in Philadelphia today who might not get the same chance I did. That's because the city shut down Catholic Social Services over a religious-freedom dispute two years ago. Fortunately the organization, and countless unknown children, got another chance this week.

My mom loved children so much that she made them the center of her life. She became a foster parent in 1972 and over nearly half a century she gave a new life to more than 130 foster children. Whether they were with her for 10 days or 10 years, every child that came into her home was treated like family.

I won't sugarcoat it. Fostering isn't easy, and nearly half of foster parents burn out after only a year, according to Irene Clements of the National Foster Parent Association. My mother would say she lasted as long as she did because of the unique support that Catholic Social Services provided.

The organization is one of more than two dozen private foster agencies in Philadelphia. But Catholic Social Services' families often look different from typical foster families. Some 60% are black. Many of its foster parents are single mothers, and some have raised biological children too. All share something in common: They intentionally chose to work with an agency that is driven by its religious convictions. This community succeeds because families and staff are guided by their faith and support one another unconditionally.

In 2018 Philadelphia told Catholic Social Services that it could no longer minister to foster families. That's because, as a Catholic agency, its religious character prevented it from endorsing same-sex or unmarried couples as foster parents. My mother could no longer take foster children into her home in partnership with an agency—and with the support of social workers—she had known for 46 years.

The city's decision to close down this 200-year-old ministry makes no sense. Catholic Social Services serves all children regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation. Same-sex or unmarried couples who want to become foster parents can work with dozens of other private foster agencies in Philadelphia. Three of them are even specially certified to help families headed by same-sex couples. Perhaps that's why not a single same-sex couple had approached Catholic Social Services looking for approval.

The city's decision to shut out Catholic Social Services was devastating to my mom. She had empty beds in her home and plenty of love to give but was denied the opportunity to care for those in need. I saw up close the great pain that losing her sense of purpose caused.

Many Catholic Social Services foster families are still ready to care for children. But the city won't let them—even though it announced more than 200 children needed a home only days after it stopped working with Catholic Social Services. Foster children like me are being deprived an opportunity to rise above their circumstances simply because local officials see political benefit in such a policy.

My mother spent years fighting for Catholic Social Services as a plaintiff in *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*. She fought to protect the right of Catholic Social Services to care for kids in need consistent with its sincere religious beliefs. Unfortunately, my mom died in 2018, before she could see this commitment through. That's why I'm now speaking up on her behalf.

The Supreme Court heard my mother's case on Wednesday. "This court has repeatedly said there should be room for those with different views," said Lori Windham, counsel for the foster families. "Our pluralistic society is at its best when it has a Free Exercise Clause that protects free exercise, not just of those who agree with the city officials in charge." She's right, and I pray the Supreme Court agrees.

Mr. Paul is a former foster child and the adoptive son of Cecelia Paul.

Appeared in the November 6, 2020, print edition.

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