

Koch brothers' donation to Catholic University stirs protests

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) Dozens of Catholic leaders are protesting the decision by the Catholic University of America to accept a large donation from the foundation of Charles Koch, a billionaire industrialist who is an influential supporter of libertarian-style policies that critics say run counter to church teaching.

Charles Koch and his brother, David, “fund organizations that advance public policies that directly contradict Catholic teaching on a range of moral issues from economic justice to environmental stewardship,” says a four-page letter to CUA President John Garvey, released Monday (Dec. 16).

The letter was signed by 50 priests, social justice advocates, theologians and other academics, including several faculty at CUA in Washington.

The \$1 million grant from the Charles Koch Foundation was announced last month. Along with \$500,000 from the Busch Family Foundation, the Koch gift will underwrite the hiring of three visiting scholars and a “visiting scholar-practitioner from the business world.”

“As you well know, Catholic social teaching articulates a positive role for government, an indispensable role for unions, just tax policies, and the need for prudent regulation of financial markets in service of the common good,” said the letter, directed to Andrew Abela, dean of CUA’s new School of Business and Economics.

“We are concerned that by accepting such a donation you send a confusing message to Catholic students and other faithful Catholics that the Koch brothers’

anti-government, Tea Party ideology has the blessing of a university sanctioned by Catholic bishops,” it continues.

CUA is the only Catholic university in the U.S. that is sponsored and partially funded directly by the American hierarchy; most other Catholic schools are operated by religious orders. It is also a pontifical university, meaning it is certified by the Vatican.

Critics say that makes the donation, which CUA faculty said is one of the largest single gifts in the school’s history, especially troubling.

This is not the first time CUA’s decisions have prompted protests. More than 80 Catholic academics and other leaders objected to the university’s decision to invite House Speaker John Boehner to give the school’s 2011 commencement address, saying House GOP economic policies violate U.S. bishops’ statements opposing federal budget cuts for the needy, especially without asking sacrifices of the wealthy.

In many ways, the new letter is a proxy in a larger turf battle within the U.S. church between its social justice-oriented left wing and its more conservative right wing that says Catholics can disagree on the application of church teaching to the economy.

As the letter notes, Pope Francis has been a persistent and sharp critic of many free market economic policies that he says hurt the poor and worsen income inequality. The pope, for example, has blasted “the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation” and ripped “trickle-down” economics that reflect the kind of laissez-faire theories that the Koch brothers support.

The Koch brothers, who are not Catholic, have actively thrown their wealth behind conservative and libertarian political causes and candidates that reflect their desire for smaller government, lower taxes, fewer regulations on business and less oversight of the financial markets. They have backed Tea Party organizations, anti-union initiatives, and opposed environmental regulations. Koch Industries was founded as an oil company, and energy remains its core business.

The Kochs have also donated to universities to establish programs in business and related endeavors, and the CUA letter cites reports of “unacceptable meddling in academic content and the hiring process of faculty” by the Koch foundation.

Abela, the business school head, said those concerns are unfounded. In an interview before receiving the letter, Abela said that the Koch foundation had contacted CUA because it felt the new business school's mission to promote a "person-centered economy" dovetailed with its own goals of fostering "principle entrepreneurship."

Abela said foundation officials in fact "spent a whole day reading the social encyclicals" of various popes, and after that still wanted to provide funds for CUA to hire three visiting scholars from academia and one "visiting scholar-practitioner" from the business world — no strings attached.

The scholar-practitioner, who Abela would not identify, will start in January and is a venture capitalist who Abela said "takes his Catholic faith very seriously."

Abela added that there is "a fairly wide range of what people consider to be consistent with Catholic social teaching" and he said the business school and the Koch foundation's mission fit within those parameters.

"I'm just delighted to draw anybody into that conversation," he said. "And if they want to bring money, double bonus."

The Koch grant was announced last month with little fanfare but sparked an online petition from the liberal religious advocacy group Faithful America. The petition says that Catholic University "needs to put Pope Francis' vision of a church for the poor ahead of the Koch brothers' radical agenda."

Several CUA faculty had also privately expressed alarm over the Koch donation and the growing influence at CUA of advocates of conservative economic views that go against positions backed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as the popes and long-standing church teaching. Several of them are now speaking out publicly.

Among the signatories of the letter are CUA theologian William A. Barbieri Jr.; Ken Pennington of the CUA law school; Frederick L. Ahearn Jr. of CUA's National Catholic School of Social Service; and William V. D'Antonio, a senior fellow at CUA's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

Others signing the letter include several former officials of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Miguel Diaz, a theologian at the University of Dayton and former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. Also signing the letter were the Rev. Stephen A. Privett, a Jesuit priest and president of the University of San Francisco;

the Rev. Fred Kammer, head of the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University in New Orleans; Marty Wolfson of the Higgins Labor Studies Program at the University of Notre Dame; and the Rev. Drew Christiansen, former editor of the Jesuit weekly America and a longtime adviser to the U.S. bishops on international affairs.