



(NCR illustration/Toni-Ann Ortiz/Dreamstime)



by Tom Roberts

[View Author Profile](#)

troberts@ncronline.org

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

December 21, 2017

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In early March, Timothy Busch stepped to a lectern in the sanctuary of the Crypt Church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. In an apparent reference to the presidential inauguration that had occurred less than two months before, he told those in the congregation that Catholics looked forward to a new "time of light."

Busch, a wealthy Catholic who openly aspires to influence both church and state, thanked Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, for celebrating the Mass, which had just begun. The Mass opened a conference at the Catholic University of America business school that bears Busch's name. The program was sponsored by the [Napa Institute](#), an organization co-founded by Busch that espouses a mix of conservative theology and libertarian economics.

The tableau at the Crypt Church was televised by the Eternal Word Television Network, where Busch is a member of the board and which, according to his comments at another event, he helps to fund. (The event is [viewable on YouTube here.](#))

It is as illuminating an illustration as one might find of the influence that an "ideologically motivated funder" can have on the direction of the church and institutions associated with it.

In his brief remarks, Busch, an attorney and founder of the Busch Firm, which specializes in estate planning for the wealthy, termed the moment "this very, very important time of our nation ... a time when many of us as Catholics saw it as a time of darkness and now we see a time of light. It may be a challenging light, but a time of light," he said in an apparent reference to the transition in administrations from Barack Obama to Donald Trump. Busch said the assembly would pray for the nation, and added, "We will in the next day learn more in our hearts and our minds where this next term will take us, and we pray it will be for greatness to restore our country."

[Related: Knights of Columbus' financial forms show wealth, influence](#)

There are others similarly motivated who are putting their money into advocacy groups and think tanks that aim to influence church institutions and to shape the Catholic narrative for the wider culture. While there is no formal mechanism for

tracking the growth of such organizations, NCR first called attention to their proliferation in a [report detailing Knights of Columbus spending](#) on conservative communications outlets, political think tanks and advocacy groups. Such activities are quite different from the charitable groups that have traditionally been the recipients of Knights' funding and that still receive the bulk of the organization's donations.

Busch, who is also founder and CEO of Pacific Hospitality Group, which owns and manages hotels and resorts in California, is but one of the higher-profile funders. He made clear at another Catholic University event, a [conference on "Good Profit"](#) held in October, that such groups were the real force behind evangelization of the culture.

He calls the groups "Catholic NGOs" and said, "The evangelization of our country is being done by private foundations, Catholic NGOs, like Napa Institute and [Legatus](#)," referring to an organization whose membership requirements assure that only Catholics of substantial means get to join. It was founded by Thomas Monaghan, who attended the conference.



Timothy Busch (Newscom/ZUMAPRESS/The Orange County Register/Eugene Garcia)

Monaghan, the former Domino's Pizza mogul, is no stranger to this brand of evangelization. He founded his own Catholic college, [Ave Maria University](#), and a purpose-built community, Ave Maria Town, near Naples, Florida, to hold it.

Catholic nonprofits, said Busch, are "what's making a difference in the American church and why we're so vibrant, and the rest of the world is not vibrant."

He described Catholic nonprofits, most of which have no formal or canonical relationship with the church, as "tethered to the church through a bishop" and in that way, he said, "they're following the magisterium of the church. But they have access to capital that the church doesn't."

An inspection of IRS 990 forms that nonprofits are required to file annually and of literature examining such groups shows a significant number have been founded in recent years, and that they depend upon donations from foundations or from wealthy individual Catholics. In line with a trend in the wider culture, some of the groups that make up a web of Catholic organizations are deeply engaged in advancing a conservative political/religious agenda.

A diagram, family-tree style, of the funders, their overlapping board memberships and the organizations that benefit from their donations, would result in a lot of tangled branches. If they were placed on a liberal-to-conservative spectrum, they would group, both in ecclesial and political views, well to the right of center.

Busch is hardly alone in the higher strata of Catholic wealth. The phrase "ideologically motivated funder" was used in an [October 2015 article](#) published by Inside Philanthropy and headlined, "Sean Fieler's Philanthropy: The Hedge Funder Who Promotes Conservative Values."

The piece says that Fieler, described as a devout Catholic and successful hedge funder, "has emerged in recent years as a robust funder with plenty of opinions." And he has created and/or funded plenty of options for acting on those opinions.

Advertisement

The 990 forms that his [Chiaroscuro Foundation](#) filed with the IRS for 2015 lists more than \$5.5 million in donations to more than 60 organizations. The 45-year-old Fieler, president of Equinox Partners, is the foundation's major donor, having given slightly more than \$6 million to Chiaroscuro in 2015, according to the IRS document.

The foundation is increasingly funding "work around the beginning and end of life," said Fieler in a Dec. 1 phone interview. "The pro-life movement has been very effective in addressing women's needs from the point of conception on, but I think the pro-life movement has been less good and has far fewer resources that are pre-conception focused. So I see that as an opportunity, a gap in the movement where really there is a sizeable role for philanthropy."

He said the foundation has been cutting back on the number of organizations it funds in an effort to target more effectively and strategically those dealing with beginning- and end-of-life issues.

Many of the organizations listed on the 990 forms for 2015 reflect the beginning-of-life interests, and there are also donations listed to organizations like the [Patients Rights Council](#) in Steubenville, Ohio, which focuses on end-of-life matters.



Mark Rienzi speaks outside the Supreme Court, with the Little Sisters of the Poor. Rienzi is a professor at Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law and senior counsel at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. (Courtesy of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty)

But the list includes a mix of organizations that are more involved in the political and policy realm. Some well-known players on the Catholic/religious right are among the significant beneficiaries of Fieger's donations:

- The [Becket Fund for Religious Liberty](#), a legal organization that has done a great deal of work advancing the objections of the Little Sisters of the Poor and others to the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate, received \$100,000. While Becket makes its case in the name of Catholics and as a matter of religious freedom, major mainstream Catholic institutions such as the Catholic Hospital Association and the National Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities have said they could live with the exceptions to the mandate already carved out for religious institutions.
- Catholic University's [Busch School of Business and Economics](#), increasingly a beneficiary of conservative donors, received \$150,000. The school received a major boost in recent years with a \$15 million donation from Busch and \$10 million from Charles Koch, a leading advocate of unrestrained libertarian economics. The two are credited for putting together a total gift with others of \$50 million.
- [Courage](#), a controversial ministry to Catholic homosexuals that encourages gays to remain celibate, received \$60,000.
- [Ethics and Public Policy Center](#) received \$100,000. The center is a leading conservative think tank in Washington dealing with issues of religion and ethics across denominational and faith boundaries. It is home base for George Weigel, a widely read conservative Catholic commentator who has written exhaustively about St. Pope John Paul II.
- [Femm Foundation](#) in New York received a total of \$1 million. The foundation is a women's health organization that discourages use of artificial birth control.
- [First Things](#), a conservative Catholic publication that has published some stinging criticism of Pope Francis, received \$35,000.

- [Holy Family School of Faith](#), Overland Park, Kansas, an enterprise begun by Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, "with the goal of renewing the culture of our Catholic schools and individuals," received \$80,000.
- [John Paul II Center for Women](#), Marietta (near Syracuse), New York, founded in 2008 and offering fertility care and "theology of the body" courses, received \$120,000.
- [Sophia Institute Press](#), Manchester, New Hampshire, which exists primarily to produce conservative Catholic literature and teaching materials, received \$161,000. One of its trustees is Dan Burke, executive director and writer for EWTN's National Catholic Register.
- [Witherspoon Institute](#), a conservative think tank founded in 2003 and located in Princeton, New Jersey, received \$150,000. One of its best-known senior fellows is Princeton University professor Robert George, one of the country's leading conservative Catholic intellectuals.

Fieler said that in the current year, end-of-life issues garner more of the foundation's resources because "the amount of philanthropy directed toward the end of life issues ... is incredibly small. It's just not where most philanthropists are focused or interested."

Frank Hanna III is another figure who shows up prominently among philanthropists whose money have increased the visibility and the influence of conservative organizations that, among other ideological purposes, make a strong case for the compatibility of Catholicism with the "virtues" of capitalism.

Unlike some others, Hanna apparently does not use the mechanism of a foundation or institute to dispense his largesse. There is no mention of any such structure in a long profile that appeared in the October 2007 issue of *Philanthropy* magazine. Nor is any mentioned in a long list of his affiliations on the website of Hanna Capital, LLC, the Atlanta firm where he is CEO.

The [magazine profile](#) appeared after he received the 2007 William E. Simon prize for Philanthropic Leadership (\$250,000 to be distributed to a charity of the winner's choice), which is given by the Philanthropy Roundtable, which also publishes the

magazine. Simon, former secretary of the treasury under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, was a celebrated Catholic and highly successful investor who turned to philanthropic work in the latter years of his life.

Hanna, 55, is a lawyer, and described variously as a merchant banker and philanthropist. He has written widely on wealth and its purposes, including the 2008 book *What Your Money Means (and How to Use It Well)*. His corporate bio says that he "has devoted considerable time, thought, and energy to the reform of education and to the rejuvenation of right thinking about the virtues of capitalism," lecturing widely "about the meaning of wealth as well as our obligations to the less fortunate."

As a member of Regnum Christi, the lay arm of the Legionaries of Christ, he has been involved in the development of private Catholic schools in the Atlanta area. Most of his educational reform efforts have been targeted at advancing "school choice" initiatives and he worked for passage of charter school legislation in Georgia.

Beyond Atlanta, Hanna said his philanthropy is aimed at efforts to renew the culture. As *Philanthropy* magazine put it: "If educational reform represents an effort to renew the culture from the bottom up, then public policy advocacy is a way to change the culture from the top down."

To that latter end, his money and efforts (no amounts are given in any of the materials found online) go to such favorites as the [Acton Institute](#), a think-tank headed by a Catholic priest, Fr. Robert Sirico. The institute describes itself as "dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace." It is heavily libertarian in its views and gives out the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, named after the late and controversial economic theorist and Nobel Prize winner who railed against government regulations and who viewed increasing profits as the sole concern of business executives.

"Since the beginning, Americans have argued about whether voluntary associations threatened democracy by permitting small groups of citizens, particularly the wealthy, to exercise power disproportionate to their numbers or whether such bodies were essential to a citizenry that, without them, would be powerless to influence the state."

- Peter Dobkin Hall, in *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*

Hanna has a pragmatic set of criteria, philosophically tinged, for determining philanthropic interests. He has developed a "principle of indispensability," giving only where he thinks his donations would be essential and have greatest effect, "avoiding organizations where his contribution would be non-essential," according to the Philanthropy profile.

He and Sirico are mutually admiring. "Acton is the nation's foremost advocate for a free market circumscribed by the Judeo-Christian ethic," he told the magazine.

Said Sirico, "If Frank gets involved, he jumps in at the deep end."

The profile contains other glowing reviews from principals at the Becket Fund and the [Federalist Society](#), two other groups he supports. The Federalist Society, described in an April New Yorker article as "a nationwide organization of conservative lawyers," advocates for conservative candidates for judgeships. Its president, Leonard Leo was described as having "served, in effect, as Trump's subcontractor on the selection of [Neil] Gorsuch" to fill the most recent vacancy on the U.S. Supreme Court.

In addition to Acton, the Becket Fund and the Federalist Society, Hanna lists as affiliations on his company's website the following: the American Enterprise Institute; Catholic Leadership Institute; EWTN; Ethics and Public Policy Center; FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students); and the Napa Institute.

He also purchased and donated to the Vatican Library the famous Bodmer Papyrus, which contains the oldest existing copy of the Gospel of Luke and one of the oldest copies of the Gospel of St. John, and which has since been renamed the Hanna Papyrus.

In a 2016 speech at Catholic University business school on "What Kind of Virtues Lead to Prosperity," he urged against the "constant temptation to get caught up in discussions and considerations of material prosperity" even when speaking about Catholic social teaching.

While some of the things Pope Francis says "puzzle me at times," he said he concentrates on those areas that give him inspiration, and he thinks Francis is "telling us ... that material prosperity is not the same thing as spiritual prosperity, and thus material prosperity is not true human prosperity."

He said he believes that is true and, in that case, also believes that "we need not look to the social teaching of the church and her various encyclicals as guides to material prosperity but rather as guides to cultivating our spiritual prosperity."

Spiritual, not material, prosperity is the world's greatest challenge, and its spread, he argues, is diminished by a lack of Christian witness.

He said "we lost the battle on gay marriage" because "we didn't have credibility." On that point, he drew attention to Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who refused to distribute marriage licenses to same-sex couples. "What she did was notable," he said. "But she's been married four times to three different men. Where's the credible witness?"

In Hanna's thinking as well as his philanthropy, the weave is thick among religion, culture and politics.

The growth of private nonprofits is a contemporary phenomenon that grows out of a historical pattern in the wider culture. In *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, a 1992 collection of essays assembled by Peter Dobkin Hall, nonprofits are seen emerging as "an institutional sector" in government calculations only in the 1980s.

However, Hall writes: "Since the beginning, Americans have argued about whether voluntary associations threatened democracy by permitting small groups of citizens, particularly the wealthy, to exercise power disproportionate to their numbers or whether such bodies were essential to a citizenry that, without them, would be powerless to influence the state."

Much has changed since the publication of that book, and a substantial industry has arisen tracking the growing world of philanthropy and nonprofits. According to Hall, the nonprofit sector grew from 12,500 charitable, tax-exempt nonprofits in 1940 to more than 700,000 in the early 1990s. According to the Urban Institute, there were 1.56 million nonprofits in 2012, including 386,000 religious congregations.

[Related: Koch, Turkson speak at Catholic University's 'Good Profit' conference](#)

If Busch of the Napa Institute considers Catholic nonprofits a sign of church vitality and the real evangelizing corps in the church, Stephen Schneck, former director of [Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies](#), sees the surge

in growth as often providing an alternative structure to the church.

In an email answer to a question about the growth of such organizations, he said part of the growth can be attributed to a reaction to the U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral, "[Economic Justice for All](#)," which explores "the moral dimensions of economic activity." It could be characterized as a document that, while recognizing the benefits of a market economy, also issues substantial warnings about unbridled capitalism and clearly cautions against the highly individualistic notions of freedom espoused by libertarians.

When the letter on the economy was issued, he said, "pro-market conservatives like Bill Simon, Michael Novak, Richard Neuhaus and others began a systematic effort to create a sort of parallel to the bishops' conference — an array of non-profit organizations, media, clerics and academics that could claim some legitimacy as alternative Catholic voices, but that also were authentically conservative in the America, pro-market, pro-military style."

In addition to Simon, Schneck was referring to Novak, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of numerous books on religion and culture. One of his best known is *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. Novak died in February at age 83.

The network of organizations, however, is keeping his legacy alive. In 2016, Novak joined Catholic University's Busch School of Business and Economics as a distinguished visiting fellow in the Arthur and Carlyse Ciocca Center for Principled Entrepreneurship.

"Deep-pocketed conservatives and their foundations were and remain very committed to funding these efforts at levels that cannot be matched by resources within the episcopacy."

–Stephen Schneck, former director of Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies

The Acton Institute created the Novak Award in 2000 to honor outstanding scholarly research into the relationship between religion, economic freedom, and the free and virtuous society.

Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, who converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism, in 1989 founded the Institute on Religion and Public Life, which publishes First Things magazine. It has become a major outlet for right-wing Catholic political and theological views.

There is perhaps no better example of the array of organizations and their ability to draw donors than those listed in a previous [story in NCR listing the nonprofits favored for funding by Supreme Knight Carl Anderson](#) of the Knights of Columbus. A former political operative who got his start working for Sen. Jesse Helms, Anderson funds many of the same organizations listed above and, in addition, an array of conservative media outlets, as well as Vatican communication apparatus.

"Deep-pocketed conservatives and their foundations were and remain very committed to funding these efforts at levels that cannot be matched by resources within the episcopacy," said Schneck. Consequently, he added, the bishops are influenced by these organizations — "their academic and intellectual firepower, and their extensive media outreach."

Schneck believes it is "increasingly difficult to identify the line between this conservative Catholic deployment of organizations and the official institutions of the church in America."

Hanna takes an entirely different view, believing there has not been a "proliferation" of such organizations.

"I might even argue that the 'Catholic world' has lagged the rest of society in this regard," he wrote in an email response to questions.

He also believes "as someone who has meandered through various circles of wealth on occasion, and who has studied this issue in quite some depth, that the role of such wealth is vastly overrated."



Charles Koch, left, speaks at a Busch School of Business and Economics at the Catholic University of America event about "good profit," October 2017. At right is Andreas Widmer, co-founder and director of the Art & Carlyse Ciocca Center for Principled Entrepreneurship at the school. (Courtesy of the Catholic University of America/Beatriz Lopez Bonetti)

In terms of the wider culture, he believes that a reading of history, including the Federalist Papers and the Bill of Rights, shows the founders far more concerned about the possibilities of government overreach than they were about the influence of wealth.

He cites vast social movements such as the civil rights movement, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the environmental movement and even the rise of Donald Trump, who, he said, "spent a relative pittance of his own personal wealth on his campaign."

In those instances, he said, he is "struck by the degree to which each of these movements was not propelled by wealth."

He cites his book on giving as containing his philanthropic rationale and adds, "I am constantly seeking apostolates through which my efforts or support might draw others closer to Him. While I hope they are efficacious, I am comforted by St. Teresa of Calcutta, who told us God does not call us to be successful, but faithful."

As for Fieler, he said he doesn't see much of a connection between what his foundation does and Schneck's critique. "There's activities that are appropriate within the church [structures] and there's activities appropriate for the lay faithful outside" of such structures, he said.

There is, of course, no formal means within the church for measuring the influence of wealth. But it is clear that money buys access to influential places. It is safe to say that the everyday Catholic would not be able to command the National Basilica's Crypt Church and the cardinal archbishop of Washington.

Both Busch and Hanna are trustees of the [Papal Foundation](#), a U.S. organization whose members include all U.S. cardinals, dedicated to raising money for the pope's use. Individual donors pledge to give a minimum of \$100,000 a year over at least 10 years. Hanna is also a member of the Order of Malta and of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

The [annual Napa Institute gatherings](#) held at one of Busch's California resorts regularly attracts leading conservative archbishops and cardinals from the U.S. and the Vatican. It is a gathering for those at the upper end of the economic spectrum, complete with gourmet dining, fine wines and cigar smoking sessions.

And Busch was clear during the Good Profits conference — where Charles Koch, his partner in assembling a \$50 million gift to the business school, was a major draw — that big money and the right economic philosophy can bridge deep ideological and theological divides. Busch is a vocal warrior on the conservative side of cultural issues, but even he was able to overlook Koch's pro-choice and marriage equality views to declare the libertarian icon "the refounder of America."

He was clear, too, that it was the \$50 million donation that had "re-energized the Catholic University of America" and had "made it great again."

Editor's note: *NCR is a reader-supported non-profit organization, a 501(c)(3) organization under IRS guidelines. About 60 percent of our revenue comes from subscriptions and advertising, and the remainder comes from donations. Our federal*

form 990, which non-profits file annually with the IRS, is available on the About Page on our website and through various charity monitors like Charity Navigator. NCR has also received two grants from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to fund our Global Sisters Report project. The first grant was \$2.3 million for 2013-2016, and the second grant was \$2.8 million for 2016-2019.

[Tom Roberts retired last month after serving 24 years with NCR. His email address is troberts@ncronline.org. NCR Bertelsen intern James Dearie contributed to this report.]

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 29, 2017-Jan. 11, 2018** print issue under the headline: Money and church intertwined.