

Year Probe

Catholic Aid Under Fire

Washington

During much of the Vietnam war, Catholic Relief Services abandoned its apolitical humanitarian role and became an adjunct of the American military effort, a leading Catholic weekly has charged.

The charges, which will appear in the next issue of the National Catholic Reporter, grew out of a year-long investigation of Catholic Relief Services by the weekly's Washington correspondent, Richard Rashke.

In his account, Rashke alleges:

- That CRS turned over vast quantities of relief supplies — food, clothing and medicines — to both U.S. and South Vietnamese military units to be used as pay for irregular forces and “incentives” for intelligence gathering.

- That U.S. military personnel worked in CRS offices, where they had access to CRS field reports that contained information valuable to military intelligence but possibly disastrous to the Vietnamese civilians CRS was chartered to help.

- That as much as 90 per cent of the church relief agency's budget came from the U.S. Agency for Informational Development program in Vietnam on a quid pro quo basis which presupposed the church agency would reciprocate “by accepting U.S. policy without criticism and by sharing information with USAID personnel,” the Reporter said.

- That CRS supplied rations for interrogation centers and political prisons, including the Con Son prison with its infamous “tiger cages.”

- That the U.S. military “built CRS into its refugee program” of forcing Vietnamese civilians from homes and farms into refugee camps, which were supplied by CRS.

- That CRS “encouraged” its staff members to live rent-free in housing on USAID compounds and used the CIA's Air America for staff travel and shipment of relief goods.

All of this was taking place at a time when opposition to the war was mounting in this country, and the U.S. Catholic bishops, who are ultimately responsible for the direction of CRS, were increasingly critical of U.S. war policy and demanding U.S. military withdrawal.

The Most Rev. James S. Rausch, general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, to which CRS is ultimately responsible, said he has not yet seen the Reporter account and therefore could not comment. He said that if the charges are substantiated, the bishops would “certainly want to take action.”

Information in the Reporter account was derived largely from U.S. government reports and interviews with former CRS-Vietnam personnel as well as staff members of other voluntary and U.S. government agencies who served in Vietnam.

CRS, which is headquartered in New York, refused to make any of its files or reports available, Rashke said.

As the official humanitarian arm of American Catholics, CRS is supported in part by collections in all churches on a designated Sunday, usually in late March. Like other worldwide relief agencies, it also derives a large chunk of its budget from the contribution from the government of surplus food-stuffs under Public Law 480.

In 1975, church members gave \$6.5 million to CRS or three per cent of its total, worldwide budget.