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A line of people wearing masks walk into a building with the sign "Catholic Charities RGV Hum

Migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. walk into a temporary humanitarian respite center run by Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in McAllen, Texas, April 8, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

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During a contentious hearing, a top Republican on the House Committee on Homeland Security on July 16 appeared to walk back a previous statement that Catholic entities are among the nongovernmental organizations subject to a probe by the committee about their work with migrants.

At the hearing titled, "An Inside Job: How NGOs Facilitated the Biden Border Crisis," witnesses and Republican lawmakers alleged more than 200 NGOs were "incentivizing and facilitating illegal entry" during former President Joe Biden's administration.

A June 11 press release from the same committee said it "launched a probe" into NGOs it alleged were "involved in providing services or support to inadmissible aliens during the Biden-Harris administration's historic border crisis."

That release, which is still posted to the committee's website, specifically names Catholic Charities USA (at the top of its list) and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (fourth on the list) among the NGOs the committee would probe about their work with the federal government or grants they received, among other information.

But at the hearing, Rep. Michael Guest, R-Miss., chairman of the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement, argued, "We are not casting a broad net on every non-governmental organization, every nonprofit."

"We are instead focusing this hearing on those who have profited off of the illegal immigration that we saw under the Biden-Harris administration," said Guest, who chaired the hearing in the absence of the full committee's retiring chairman, Rep. Mark Green, R-Tenn.

"I have mentioned nothing in my statement about nonprofits such as Red Cross, Catholic Charities, Samaritan's Purse, Doctors Without Borders — nonprofits who actually take money and use it for the good, who are out there collecting money from their congregation, from members of the community who wish to give back," he continued. "Instead, this hearing is focused on those handful of nonprofits who received their money almost exclusively from grants from the federal government, but yet still claim to be nonprofits."

But Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., pointed to the June press release in his opening remarks, arguing, "Just read the Republicans' press release about their vindictive investigation of American charities and this sham hearing."

"Republicans falsely accused Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, evangelical, Muslim and secular charities that feed, clothe, and aid the needy of having 'supercharged the business model of cartels,'" Thompson said. "That is a slanderous accusation and fringe conspiracy theories with no basis in reality."

Thompson called the probe "an attack on diverse faith-based organizations over their religious practices" and "a threat to charities that do humanitarian work Republicans do not like."

The press release was later entered into the hearing record.

A spokesperson for the committee did not immediately respond to OSV News' request for comment seeking clarification about Guest's remarks about Catholic Charities.

Kevin Brennan, vice president for media relations and executive communications for Catholic Charities USA, told OSV News, "We appreciate the bipartisan compliments directed during this hearing at the merciful work of Catholic Charities agencies."

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"Last year, the 168 independent Catholic Charities agencies across the United States served more than 16 million people in need: the elderly, expectant mothers, children in poverty, veterans, refugees, individuals suffering with mental health challenges and people facing almost any other imaginable category of suffering," he said. "This work is a response to the Gospel mandate to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the ill and welcome the stranger. For decades, federal, state and local governments have relied on Catholic Charities agencies to serve those most in need because of the exceptional, compassionate care Catholic Charities agencies provide."

A spokesperson for the USCCB acknowledged receipt of the committee's letter in June and told OSV News the conference has responded to the committee's questions.

"For over 45 years, the USCCB has entered into agreements with the federal government to serve groups of people specifically authorized by the federal government to receive assistance," said Chieko Noguchi, executive director of public affairs for the USCCB. "This included refugees, people granted asylum, unaccompanied children, victims of human trafficking, and Afghans who assisted the U.S. military abroad."

In written testimony submitted to the committee, retired Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, New York, wrote, "The Catholic Church in this nation is one of the largest privately-operated social service networks in the nation."

"For decades now, we have partnered with the federal, state, and local governments in filling gaps that the public sector alone cannot fill," DiMarzio said. "We follow the

nation's laws but, as is our right, we work to change them if they violate human rights and dignity. Our mission, as directed by our Lord Jesus Christ, is to help the most vulnerable among us, precisely because they are part of humanity and are children of God. We will continue to pursue that mission, consistent with the laws of this great country, but also in service to God's law."

Elsewhere in the hearing, Rep. Tim Kennedy, D-N.Y., issued a staunch defense of Catholic Charities. He argued the committee's efforts are "deeply offensive to Catholics across this nation, and it reeks of anti-Catholicism, and it needs to stop."

"We lose sight of the selfless humanitarian work that these local non-government organizations do when we rope them in with the partisan grievances that we're hearing here today," he said.

But others did argue that Catholic Charities should be subject to their probe, including Rep. Elijah Crane, R-Ariz.

"We're talking about the NGOs that they used as middlemen to carry out their operations, like the Catholic Charities they use to facilitate, normalize and accelerate illegal immigration into this country," Crane said.

Catholic social teaching on immigration seeks to balance three interrelated principles: the right of persons to migrate in order to sustain themselves and their families, the right of a country to regulate its borders and immigration, and a nation's duty to conduct that regulation with justice and mercy.

Asked for his thoughts about the hearing, J. Kevin Appleby, senior fellow for policy at the New York-based Center for Migration Studies and the former director of migration policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told OSV News, "The church has been a valuable partner with the Border Patrol over the years in helping to process and support asylum-seekers who legally enter the country."

"Catholic agencies help fill service gaps that the government alone cannot fill, and they do it effectively and within the confines of the law," he said. "The administration and Republicans generally should be thanking the church for her work, not persecuting her."

Elsewhere in the hearing, Republicans and Democrats sparred over the committee's rules, including those that govern whether the committee could pause its business to allow additional members to return to the room.

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.