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EDUCATION: UNICEF boxes cause controversy

School officials must decide on participation in UNICEF program

BY PATRICK CASEY
 Staff Writer

A decision to allow York Region Catholic students to collect money for the United Nations Children's Fund of Canada is in the hands of individual school officials.

On Halloween, Canadian school children have traditionally been encouraged to carry the small orange UNICEF boxes with them during their trick-or-treat journeys, collecting small change for the long-time charity organization.

However, the UNICEF program has come under fire in recent years, especially from Catholic religious representatives who believe it promotes abortion, although the group insists it supports spaced birthing.

The region's Catholic board has continued a historical tradition to make the UNICEF drive optional each fall, allowing each school to choose whether or not their students will take part in the program.

But if they do, they should request the money be directed to a designated cause.

In a memo from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Rev. William Kokesch directs all participating Catholic schools to ask UNICEF to earmark the funds from the collection boxes toward the immunization of children in Mali against tuberculosis, polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough and neo-natal tetanus.

"Dioceses and school boards are being encouraged to use the occasion again this year to urge UNICEF Canada to continue doing all it can at the international level to ensure Catholic donors receive the necessary assurances that their contributions will not be used for programs that conflict with Catholic moral principles," wrote Kokesch.

An additional option, said Kokesch, is for children to raise funds for two Catholic agencies: The Holy Childhood Association provides elementary school children an opportunity to raise funds specifically for other children, while the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace allows secondary school students to support the groups' efforts in developing countries.

If the schools want to continue the fundraising efforts at Halloween, they are more than welcome to continue that.

Several years ago, the Vatican stopped making an annual donation to UNICEF, fearing the group would use funds to give women in developing countries access to abortions and contraception.

"Our children, teachers and communities are involved in fundraising efforts all year long," said York Region Catholic board spokesperson Chris Cable. "If the schools want to continue the fundraising efforts at Halloween, they are more than welcome to continue that."

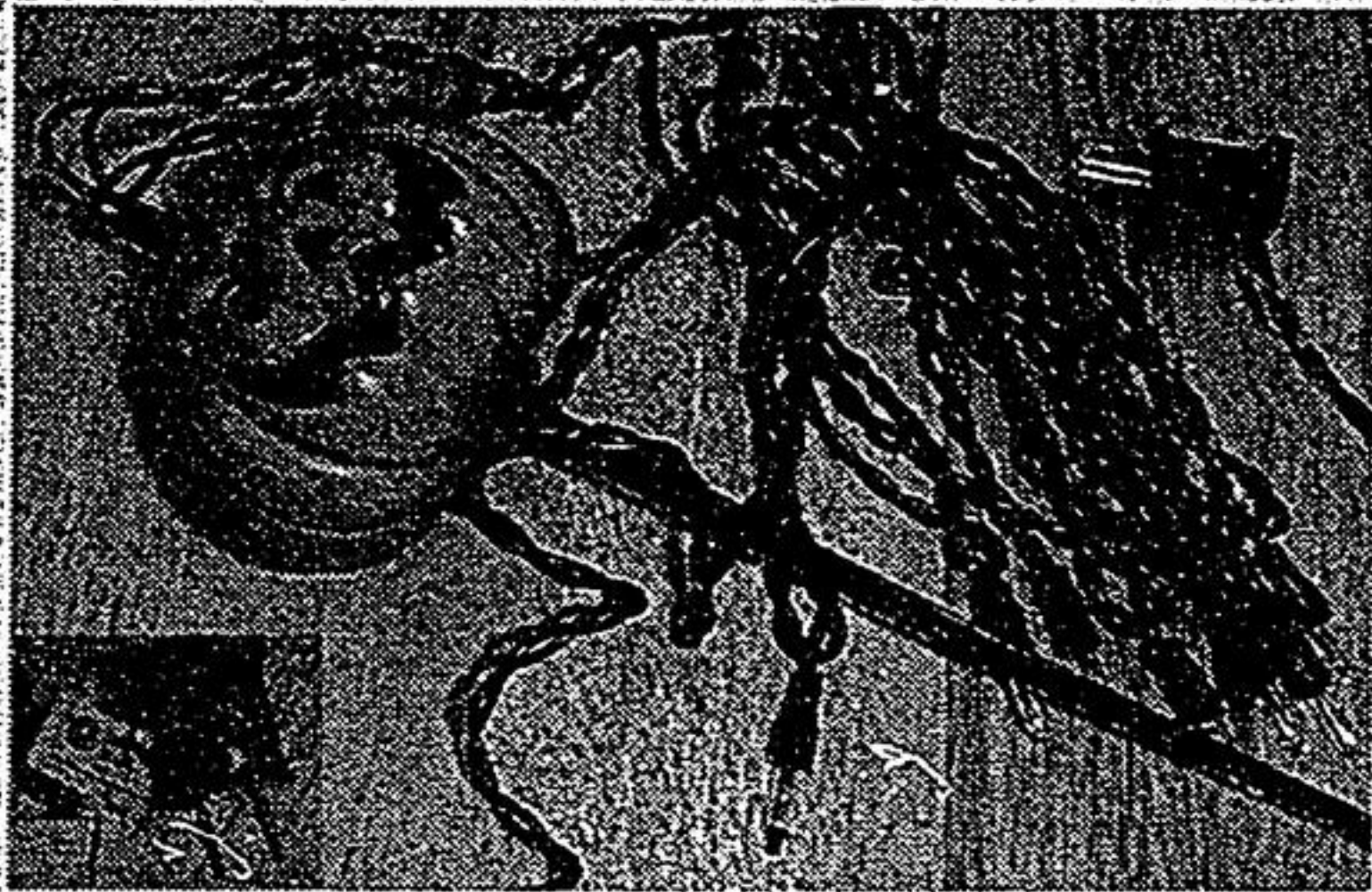
If they do so, they can support certain areas and we hope they will designate that support."

The position of the region's Catholic board is quite different from Toronto's Catholic school board, where officials dropped UNICEF three years ago in favour of a pro-life group called Aid to Women, which provides pregnant women with assistance.

Aid to Women's Toronto office is located next door to the Cabbagetown Women's Clinic on Gerrard Street, where protesters often stop women from entering the clinic and try to encourage them not to have an abortion.

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