

A New President for the WCC

December 2009
Vol. 2009 No. 4

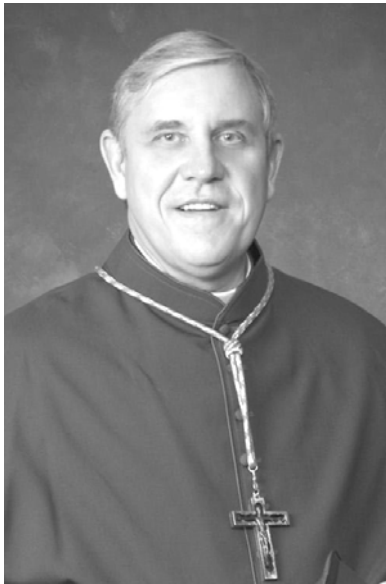
Milwaukee has a new Archbishop and that means that the Wisconsin Catholic Conference has a new President.

When Archbishop-elect Jerome E. Listecki is installed as Milwaukee's Archbishop on January 4th, he will also become the President of the WCC Board of Directors in accordance with the WCC's constitution and by-laws.

The new Archbishop is no stranger to the WCC, having been on its Board of Directors for the past four and a half years during his tenure as Bishop of La Crosse. The Archbishop-elect has served as the WCC's Secretary-Treasurer for the past three years. Archbishop-elect Listecki has been an active Board member, participating on a panel with legislators and Madison Bishop Robert C. Morlino at the WCC's *Catholics at the Capitol* event in Madison this past March.

He has met with legislators

regarding key issues, such as payday lending, and in 2006, he joined other religious leaders in ecumenical press events related to referenda on the death penalty and the definition of marriage. His background as a civil lawyer is also regarded as an asset in evaluating the impact of laws and policies on religious liberty and the Church.



The Archbishop-elect appreciates the value of policy debates and how religion can enhance that discussion. He referenced politics as a noble calling at the news conference announcing his appointment, noting that "the very word politics refers to the 'affairs of the polis' or the well being of the entire community."

Archbishop-elect Listecki will preside over his first meeting of the WCC Board in February as the fourth President in the WCC's 40-year history. Previous WCC Presidents were Archbishops William Cousins (1969-77), Rembert Weakland (1977-2002), and Timothy Dolan (2002-09).

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Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

Two beliefs are central to Catholic social teaching. One is that human life is sacred. The second is that human life is social. This is why we are called to be active citizens in the life of the community. The Church sees political advocacy as a noble undertaking and this is the reason so much of the WCC's mission is related to public policy.

Political advocacy is a very social activity and group action is central to any success we have as citizens. So alliances and coalitions are a normal part of the process.

That said, the WCC almost never formally joins coalitions. We cooperate with other groups. We will attend and speak at coalition meetings. Sometimes we appear with such groups at press events or panel discussions. But when it comes to formal membership in a coalition, the WCC generally says no.

This may sound odd given the importance of working with other like-minded citizens, but because the WCC is tied to the Church as an institution, our identity is fairly unique among groups that engage in advocacy. The WCC's formal endorsement or opposition as a religious organization has implications that don't come into play when an individual Catholic joins a coalition or group.

In such a context, it is important to keep the Church separate from other groups, even when they agree with us most of the time. When we join a coalition, oftentimes sooner or later an ally will do or say something that is at odds with our identity as Catholics, or have other partners with whom the Church would not normally affiliate.

As one veteran director of another state Catholic Conference once told me, "Once your name goes on a letterhead, you get tied to many things you don't want to be part of."

Given such realities, we have found it is better to lend our support to causes, as opposed to coalitions or organizations. This keeps the focus on the issues being debated and not on the people or groups who do the debating.

A Call for Health Care Advocacy

On November 7, the United States House of Representatives passed the Affordable Health Care for America Act (H.R. 3962) by a vote of 220 to 215. This bill institutes a nationally regulated system of health care coverage and includes a subsidized purchasing program designed to benefit lower income individuals.

The final House version incorporated an amendment, offered by Representative Bart Stupak (D-Michigan), that would make certain health care reform maintains prohibitions on the federal funding of abortion. Among the 240 Members who supported the amendment were Wisconsin Representatives David Obey (D), Thomas Petri (R), Paul Ryan (R), and F. James Sensenbrenner (R).

The Senate has begun consideration of its version of the health care reform bill, The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (H.R. 3590), and the U.S. bishops have once again raised a call for Catholics to act. The bishops reiterate that it is critical the Senate incorporate language into its plan for health care reform that maintains restrictions on the federal funding of abortion. They have also stressed the need to address other essential moral priorities in health care, such as protecting conscience rights, making health care more affordable and accessible for those without coverage, and ensuring that immigrants will not lose, or be denied, needed health care coverage.

Please respond to the bishops' call by contacting your Senators. Call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121, or send an e-mail at www.usccb.org/action. Full contact information for each Senator can be found on Members' websites at www.senate.gov.

Should both houses of Congress pass a health care bill, the two versions will have to be reconciled and made to be in total agreement in terms of language. The WCC and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) will continue to monitor the progress of this legislation.

To get updated information, visit the USCCB's website, www.usccb.org/healthcare, or contact the WCC.



WCC Backs Better Access to Public Defenders



The WCC was among those testifying this past fall in favor of legislation to adjust the indigency standards that determine whether a person is eligible for a public defender. The proposals, Senate Bill 263 and Assembly Bill 395, were reviewed at a public hearing held on October 6, 2009.

“The most significant action government can take is that of depriving a person of his or her freedom. That is why fairness is critical to our system of criminal justice,” said WCC Executive Director John Huebscher.

“In our system, those accused of wrongdoing are presumed innocent and entitled to their day in court. However, for that day in court to be meaningful, the accused must have a genuine opportunity to prove their innocence. Adequate counsel, properly compensated, is vital to that opportunity,” he added.

Huebscher cited the work of a 1997 WCC statement, *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A*

Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin, based on the findings of a 15-member WCC task force. The statement emphasized: “Criminal justice policies and pastoral responses to crime must take special care to address and serve those with little or no money. Policies must ensure that justice is as accessible to victims and offenders who are poor as it is to those who are more affluent.”

“Too often, justice is not currently accessible to poor people,” Huebscher argued. One of the major reasons for this is a lack of access to effective legal counsel. Indigency standards for public defenders have not changed since 1987. It is estimated that if guidelines were made consistent with welfare to work standards, as these bills propose, the State Public Defender (SPD) could represent an additional 12,800 cases per year.

The Judiciary Committees of both houses have endorsed the bills, but as they require expenditures, the bills were referred to the Joint Committee on Finance.

Catholics Agencies Favor New Payday Loan Rules

Three Catholics provided strong testimony at an October 7th public hearing by the Assembly Committee on Financial Institutions on several bills that would institute new payday lending regulations.

Deacon Richard Sage, Director of Catholic Charities in the La Crosse diocese, and Rhonda Schmitt, a family financial counselor for Catholic Charities in the Green Bay diocese, spoke from the perspective of their agencies, which continually deal with those burdened by payday loans. E. Michael McCann of Milwaukee testified from the vantage point of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul volunteers in the Milwaukee Archdiocese who also assist those facing fiscal distress.

Catholic Charities in the La Crosse and Green Bay

dioceses provide financial counseling services to help those who have fallen behind in paying their bills. Dcn. Sage and Ms. Schmitt discussed the experiences of those who have become trapped in payday lending. Mr. McCann reminded legislators that anti-usury laws were enacted for good reason, and that limits on payday lenders are a matter of basic justice in our society.

Together these three representatives of Catholic ministries gave witness to the Catholic principles of advancing the common good, exercising a preferential option for the poor, and acting in solidarity, reminding us that we are all responsible for each other.

The Assembly has yet to act on any of the bills.

CAPITOL REPORT is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC's activities and positions on state and federal legislation. Subscriptions are \$5 per calendar year.

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WCC Opposes Changes to Sex Education

In early November, the Assembly passed Assembly Bill 458, described by supporters as the "Healthy Youth Act." This bill would significantly change the rules for providing sex education in public schools for grades K-12. The WCC strongly opposes AB 458.

According to Barbara Sella, WCC Associate Director, "We have to remember that parents have the first and most important responsibility for educating their children. Public laws and educational policies can either support and affirm parents as primary teachers, or they can undermine parental authority and responsibility."

Currently, the decision to provide instruction in human growth and development rests with local school boards. Some school boards choose not to offer instruction in this area at all. Others stress abstinence and character education. Still others offer "comprehensive" sex education, so-called because it teaches about contraception and not just abstinence.

While AB 458 would not mandate that school districts provide sex education, only comprehensive sex education programs could be used if they did. Programs that focus solely or principally on abstinence and character education would be prohibited. In effect, this would mean that parents and school districts would be restricted in the choice

of programs they can offer school children. AB 458 requires each school board that elects not to offer human growth and development instruction to notify each parent or guardian of this fact. In short, the bill would make the school district look negligent for not adopting a comprehensive sex education program.

AB 458 would also allow a volunteer health care provider to teach the entire human growth and development curriculum in schools.

This is not permitted currently. "Many of our cash-strapped public schools districts," Sella explained, "will find it hard to resist the offer of free instruction from groups like Planned Parenthood."

At the same time, AB 458 would prohibit teen pregnancy prevention programs from accessing federal grant funds through the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) unless

these programs could demonstrate "increased use of contraceptives." This change would effectively prevent abstinence and character education programs from applying for federal funds through the DPI.

The Senate will have a chance to vote on AB 458 when it reconvenes in mid-January. Please call your State Senator directly, or through the Legislative Hotline (toll-free 1-800-362-9472), to express your opposition to AB 458. Ask them to retain current law.

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