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REPORT



The Newsletter of the
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

Catholics Witness to Faith at Capitol

Hundreds from around the state gathered in Madison on April 5, 2011, for the Wisconsin Catholic Conference's (WCC) seventh biennial *Catholics at the Capitol*. The theme, "Living Faith in the Public Square," reminds Catholics of their duty to witness to the faith and integrate it into public life.

Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison began the day by presiding over the opening prayer service. This was followed by a brief review of the important public policy issues likely to be considered during the ongoing legislative session. The keynote address was offered by

Archbishop Jerome E. ListECKI of Milwaukee, focusing on how faith and the Catholic perspective can elevate and enrich public policy discourse.

"We realize that we are in a period where issues divide many of us. The ability for civil discourse in a climate of mutual respect seems to be, at best, strained.

Our state is hurting," the Archbishop noted. "We are not assigning blame or taking sides, but we are here to help with the healing, to lend our voice, our vision and our heart to our government and its leaders to be a witness of the hope offered by those who serve Christ and his Church."

The Archbishop recounted the contribution made by Catholics to Wisconsin's schools, health care system, and communities. He stressed that Catholics must continue to live up to that tradition.



Bishop Ricken, Prof. Cecelia Klingele, Archbishop ListECKI, & Lydia LoCoco
PHOTO BY KAT WAGNER, MADISON CATHOLIC HERALD

Archbishop ListECKI also reminded the gathering that all citizens must be stewards of the common good.

"This is a challenge to us all as people of faith to understand that the demands of the most powerful unions or the priorities of the most imposing business organizations cannot silence the voices of those

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Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

One of the important aspects of the WCC's advocacy and presence in the State Capitol is the ongoing relationship we enjoy with other religious advocates and organizations.

Three religious groups with whom the WCC regularly collaborates are the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin (LOPPW). Michael Blumenfeld, director of the Jewish Conference, Scott Anderson, director of the Council of Churches, and Amy Johnson of the LOPPW and I often compare notes on matters of mutual interest and concern.

Most of the time we share insights on issues of common interest. On occasion we agree to speak as one in a joint letter or statement. Some years ago, we wrote jointly on behalf of maintaining tax-exemptions for religious organizations. This year we co-signed a letter urging that concealed weapons not be permitted in churches (see related article).

On other occasions we will join each other on panels to reflect together on the intersection of public policy and religious values. Indeed, Amy, Scott, and I did so on June 21 in Fond du Lac where we participated in an ecumenical discussion on the state budget.

Another valued partner is Wisconsin Family Action and its director, Julaine Appling. Our organizations have partnered on issues related to the definition of marriage, education issues, and matters related to conscience protection.

Sometimes, our conversations reveal that we are on different sides of a policy issue. Such conversations are always respectful and useful in their own way. Our mutual sharing, even when we don't agree, reminds us that our different traditions share a common commitment to "civil discourse."

Advocacy these days goes on in tense times, amid an overly polarized political environment. But collaborating with Michael, Scott, Amy, and Julaine is a pleasure and it makes the work truly rewarding.

Religious Advocates Weigh in on Conceal and Carry Legislation

On May 24, the executive directors of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin, wrote a joint letter to legislators urging that any new law allowing the carrying of concealed weapons not permit weapons to be brought into churches.

"Though we represent different faith traditions, we hold in common the conviction that our places of worship are islands of peace in a troubled world," the directors wrote. "Those who come to our churches, parishes and synagogues do so to place their trust in God and to witness to their conviction that our human inventions and earthly devices are not the ultimate source of our safety or security. Houses of worship are places where we don't trust in 'might makes right.'"

"Indeed, the very presence of concealed weapons would help to undercut one of the primary objectives of religious institutions, namely the fostering of peaceful relations among people of all backgrounds. Preventing weapons in our houses of faith is one way we give witness to our commitment to nonviolent coexistence," they noted.

A copy of the interfaith letter is available on the WCC website.

The amended bill (Senate Bill 93) would require a background check, state permit, and firearms training for state residents 21 or over. Everyone carrying a concealed weapon would have to carry a photo ID and a permit. Concealed weapons would be banned in schools and school grounds, courthouses, police stations, prisons, jails, and state mental hospitals. They would be permitted in state and city parks and taverns. Private businesses (including churches), private residences, and government buildings would have to post signs to keep concealed weapons out.

The Senate passed the bill this week on a vote of 25 to 8. The bill now goes to the Assembly, which is expected to pass it. Governor Scott Walker has indicated that he will sign the bill into law.

WCC Says Health Exchange Should Not Include Abortion

The WCC testified on May 25 in favor of legislation to prohibit insurance providers that participate in a future state exchange from including elective abortions in their coverage. The proposal, Senate Bill 92, is sponsored by Senator Rich Zipperer (R-Pewaukee) and more than 35 other legislators.

The federal health care reform legislation enacted last year requires states to create exchanges to offer health insurance consistent with the new law by January of 2014. States that fail to create such exchanges will have to use an exchange developed by the federal government. The federal law also gives states the option to exclude abortion coverage from health plans in the state exchange. Senate Bill 92 creates that exclusion.

“For nearly one hundred years the Catholic Church has been a voice for universal access to health care. The Church has long advocated that public funds be used to help the needy obtain health care and health insurance,” testified WCC Associate Director Barbara Sella. “Abortion, however, is not health care. No other medical procedure deliberately terminates a human life.

Women and children deserve health care, not abortion.”

“Elective abortion sends the not-so-subtle message that one of the best ways to escape poverty is by eliminating the children of the poor,” Sella argued. “Senate Bill 92 sends a different message, namely that true health care respects the dignity of every human life, irrespective of wealth, ethnicity, race, sex, disability, etc. Senate Bill 92 affirms that the government has a responsibility to foster the health and wellbeing of people currently living in poverty, not to enable their destruction.”

“We reaffirm, as the U.S. bishops did during the federal health care debate, that a way must be found so that all who live in our nation – born and unborn, citizen and immigrant – may live in dignity, from the beginning to the end of life. We uphold the work of Catholic hospitals and clinics, which serve 1 in 6 patients nationwide. These facilities demonstrate that it is indeed possible to offer women and their children the highest quality health care without resorting to abortion,” Sella concluded.

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who belong to neither group,” he recalled. “Even though some interests might be legitimate, they don’t exist apart from the public interest. As President Lincoln reminded us, ‘Right makes might and not the other way around.’ We need to be people who support rights even in difficult times.”

Participants attended morning and afternoon breakout sessions devoted to Catholic social teaching, improving parish social action, and a variety of public policy issues, including promoting life, state budgeting, immigration, advocating for the poor, and prison ministry. During lunch, attendees were provided with a short primer on effective advocacy.

After the afternoon breakout sessions there was a panel discussion among bishops and lay Catholics on “Witnessing to Hope in Uncertain Times.” Panelists included Archbishop ListECKI, Bishop David L. Ricken of Green Bay, Lydia LoCOCO of the Archdiocese, Professor Cecelia Klingele of the University of Wisconsin Law School, and moderator Professor Tom Thibodeau of Viterbo University.

At the day’s end, many of those present visited the State Capitol to lobby lawmakers on the WCC’s four legislative priorities: the biennial budget, protecting the dignity and sanctity of human life, immigration policy, and health care reform.

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Budget Expands Parental Choice in Education

The biennial budget bill significantly alters the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), currently the state's only school voucher program, and includes efforts to expand the program to students in the Racine school district.

For those students residing in the City of Milwaukee, the existing MPCP will be expanded to include any private school willing to satisfy MPCP school participation requirements. Also, the 22,500 limit on the number of pupils who can participate in the program has been eliminated.

Families whose incomes do not exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty level (\$67,050 for a family of four) may participate in the MPCP, and married couples may reduce their income by \$7,000 prior to applying this income limit. Once a student is eligible to participate in the program, he or she remains eligible to participate in future years. High schools participating in the MPCP will be allowed to charge tuition above the voucher payment amount for

families whose income is greater than 220 percent of the federal poverty level (over \$49,000 for a family of four).

The budget bill also creates the Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP). The RPCP follows the same rules as the Milwaukee program except that no more than 250 full-time students may participate in the RPCP in the 2011-12 school year, and no more than 500 pupils in the 2012-13 school year. There is no limit on participation in the 2013-14 school year. Also, the RPCP must give priority to students eligible for free and reduced lunch in 2010-11 school year.

Only pupils who reside within the Racine Unified School District (RUSD) may participate in the RPCP, and a student is only eligible if he or she was enrolled in the RUSD in the prior year; not enrolled in school in the prior year; enrolled in the RPCP in the prior year; or is enrolling in kindergarten, first grade, or ninth grade in a RPCP school.

CELEBRATING 120 YEARS OF PAPAL SOCIAL TEACHING

The WCC has prepared a resource that highlights the major social teaching documents issued by the popes over the last 120 years.

Visit www.wisconsincatholic.org to download a copy.