

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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CATHOLIC SOCIAL MINISTRY GATHERING OFFERS LOOK AT A VIBRANT CHURCH

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

It has been a few years since I last attended the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C. What I saw when I joined nearly 500 others at the 2014 edition was another inspiring example of how a diverse and vibrant group of Catholics can inspire each other and bear witness to our faith.

Initiated some years ago by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the Social Ministry Gathering is now also co-sponsored by a number of Catholic organizations, including Catholic Charities USA, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Catholic Rural Life, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Relief Services, the National Council of Catholic Women, and a number of other groups. Over a three-day period attendees renewed relationships, celebrated policy victories, educated ourselves on important policy issues, and visited our respective congressional delegations in support of the USCCB's policy priorities.

Our first session on Sunday evening included an address by John Allen, former Senior Correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and Associate Editor for *The Boston Globe*. Mr. Allen offered his insights on Pope Francis' first eleven months as Pope. He suggested that three themes are emerging in this new papacy: 1) leadership as service; 2) a strong commitment to the "social Gospel" in our Catholic tradition; and 3) mercy as a core virtue.

Allen noted that the whole world is now paying attention to this Pope and that means it is watching the Church as well. It is vital, he suggested that the world be impressed and inspired by what it sees and he challenged us to witness our shared commitment to the Gospel as opposed to our disagreements.

Monday morning featured two riveting addresses. The first was by Dr. Michael Naughton, Director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas. Dr. Naughton called us to an "upheaval in the imagination." He noted Pope Benedict's observation that globalization can make us neighbors, but not brothers. Naughton then discussed the ways we can see beyond the notion of neighborhood to the idea of true fraternity in our connections to others.

Michel Roy, Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis, shared his assessment of how the world wide Church is working to alleviate the deep human suffering caused by natural disasters and man-made tragedies of war and civil strife in the world's trouble spots.

Following the addresses, USCCB staff briefed us on the international and domestic issues we were urged to raise in our "Hill visits" at the offices of our Representative and Senators.

Immigration reform, the “No Taxpayer Funding of Abortions Act,” criminal justice reform, and peace efforts in the Middle East were among the topics discussed.

The balance of Monday and Tuesday morning was devoted to breakout sessions on a range of issues including the Middle East, poverty, crime and punishment, and economic inequality.

We devoted Tuesday afternoon to our Hill visits. Our Wisconsin group met briefly with Congressmen Ribble and Pocan, with staff for several other members including Representatives Ryan, Duffy, Sensenbrenner, Petri and Moore, and with staff for Senators Baldwin and Johnson. Every office made us feel welcome and we were impressed by the hospitality, knowledge, and thoroughness of the congressional staff that spoke with us.

Tuesday evening included a session with Rev. James Martin, SJ, editor-at-large of *America* magazine, who offered his insights on how being a Jesuit may impact Pope Francis’ approach to the papacy.

We wrapped up our time together by comparing notes on how to broaden our advocacy efforts in our home states, celebrated a closing liturgy, and enjoyed a final meal together.

Like the Pro-Life Conference in the summer, the winter Catholic Social Ministry Gathering is a forceful exhibit of our Catholic presence in the United States. Whether one supports social ministry in the parish, in the diocese, or as part of a state Catholic conference, attending the Gathering is time well spent.

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