

Public policy forum draws 2,000 Catholics to Albany

By Karen M. Franz

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the New York State Catholic Conference's March 9 Public Policy Forum was simply that it occurred.

Orchestrating the convergence of nearly 2,000 lobbyists on the state capital was in itself a monumental task. But the forum offered New York state more than a display of organizational wizardry on the part of conference and diocesan staffs. It created in Albany a strong Catholic presence, something state lawmakers are unlikely to forget in the near future.

The forum drew to Albany's Empire State Plaza numerous busloads of delegates from all eight dioceses in the state. Among the delegates were Bishops Matthew H. Clark and Dennis W. Hickey, as well as about 95 activists representing every region of the Diocese of Rochester.

Sister Dawn Notliwehr, OSF, an educational consultant for the diocesan Division of Social Ministry, said the forum was a positive experience overall, because it offered many diocesan activists their first opportunity to speak with legislative representatives regarding such concerns as abortion, the death penalty, policies affecting working mothers, the availability of human services in rural areas, employment and housing initiatives, human-sexuality curricula and school-based health clinics, and education tax relief.

Sister Notliwehr, who was one of the diocesan organizers for the day-long event, said that as a result of the forum, "Our people realize that there is a lot more information that would have been helpful to them" in the lobbying visits they made to legislators during the forum's afternoon session. As a result of this realization, she said, diocesan activists are now eager to learn more about the legislative process and Church doctrine itself.

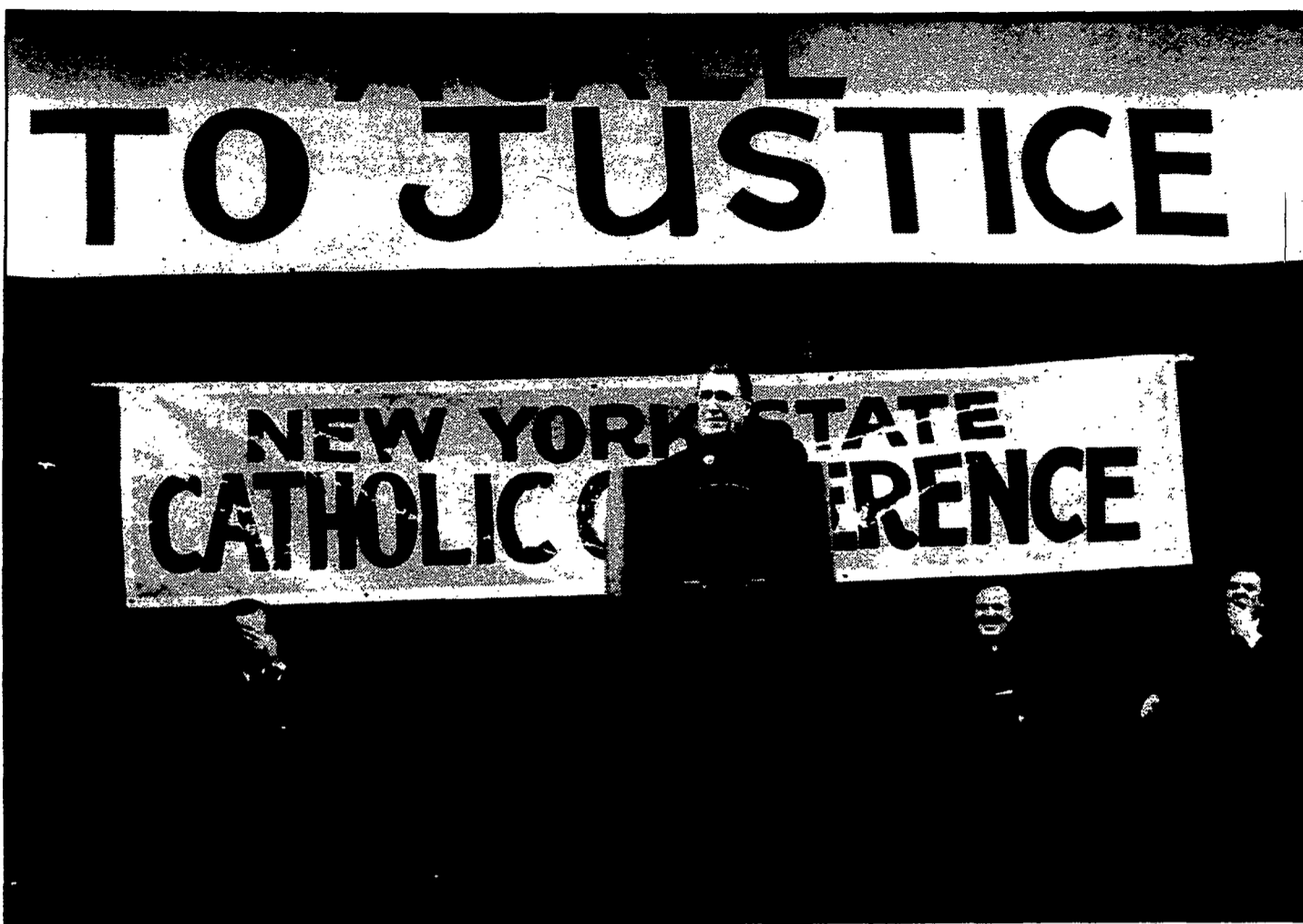
One such activist is Walter O'Hagan of Auburn, chairman of the social ministry committee at St. Alphonsus Parish. O'Hagan termed the event a "tremendous gathering" and seemed encouraged by the day's events.

He visited the 128th district's Assemblyman Michael F. Nozzolio to discuss the death penalty. "Of course, he's committed to that," O'Hagan said. "We didn't change his mind; we didn't expect to." Nevertheless, O'Hagan was pleased by the reception his delegation received from the assemblyman and his aides.

Father William Spilly of the Cayuga Team Ministry wasn't as positive about his visit to the offices of Senator James Seward of the 50th district. Father Spilly and two others spoke not with the senator but with his aide, which "wasn't helpful, because (the aide) didn't know the stand of the senator on certain issues or wasn't sure of it."

Although he felt the forum also could have been better planned, Father Spilly said "the fact that we gathered as a religious body that represents the entire state is a good thing and should be continued."

Continued on Page 16



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

During a late-morning press conference, Cardinal O'Connor said his relations with Governor Cuomo were "as excellent as they have always been." In his luncheon speech, the cardinal offered a prime example of the half-joking ridicule he frequently directs toward Cuomo, much to the governor's obvious chagrin.



Jan Armantrout of Honeoye Falls receives short shrift from Assemblyman James Nagle.



When the luncheon ran well beyond the scheduled time, many would-be lobbyists were forced to meet with their representatives during the assembly session.

Convent chosen as site for women's shelter

Sister Eileen Conheady, SSJ, and the Catholic Family Center are one step closer to opening an emergency shelter for women at St. Augustine's Convent, since the Rochester City Council planning commission approved a request to rezone the property. An earlier request to rezone both the convent and the school, which closed last spring, was opposed by members of the 19th Ward Community Association. However, when proposal drafters substituted a parking lot for the school, the community association offered no further objections.

"There was no big fight," explained Sister Conheady, who has been working to establish a women's shelter for two years. "We just had some objectives to come to consensus about. The 19th Ward Association has been supportive of the project."

St. Augustine's parish council has already approved the proposed use for the convent, and parishioners have also supported the project, according to Father William Trott, pastor.

Next, shelter organizers will develop a budget outlining their proposed use of a \$258,000 state grant. Catherine Wobus, Catholic Family Center's casework director, expected renovations to begin in August, once the state contract has been signed.

Once it opens, the shelter will accommodate up to a dozen women and five children in 11 housing units.



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