

World & Nation

Church pushes society to act on 'shame' of homelessness

Washington (NC) — At the Vatican and in Washington, Catholic Church officials issued several statements in early February, urging Christians and society to attack the crisis of homelessness.

On February 2, the Vatican issued a new document that termed adequate shelter a "universal right" and called for "bold social policy" to help the world's homeless.

A day later in Washington, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan of Brooklyn, urged Democratic and Republican presidential candidates to make the "national shame" of hunger and homelessness a central concern of the 1988 campaign.

Bishop Sullivan, chairman of the U.S. Catholic Conference Committee on Domestic Policy, addressed a news conference sponsored by the Campaign to End Hunger and Homelessness, a coalition whose members include the USCC, National Organization for Women, U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Council of Churches and the Rural Coalition.

The Vatican document, entitled "What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church and the Housing Problem," called for commitment from "all active forces of society" to fight the problem of lack of shelter.

"Any person or family that, without any direct fault on his or her part, does not have suitable housing is the victim of an injustice," the document concluded.

In Washington, Bishop Sullivan told the news conference that "this is not a partisan issue, an ideological concern, or a regional phenomenon." Furthermore, he said, "we do not write off any candidate. We will not endorse any individual. We want every candidate to make this issue a central concern of the campaign and to respond in specific terms how he would attack hunger and homelessness."

The bishop also challenged each candidate to visit a soup kitchen, food pantry or shelter by March 3 and by the same date to "spell out what priority he gives to these issues and what actions he would take as president to reduce and eventually eliminate homelessness and hunger."

The Vatican document blamed the lack of decent housing on a "structural crisis" related to the most pressing social problems facing society, including "unemployment, low salaries, the rural exodus" and overly rapid industrialization.

Produced by the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, the 8,000-word document

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Denise Walker/NC News

A UNIVERSAL RIGHT — On a bitterly cold January night, Gary Cook gives a blanket to "Miss Gertie" at St. Ann's Church in Baltimore. The inner-city church opened its doors to the homeless during a sub-freezing cold spell. A new Vatican document calls adequate shelter a "universal right" and says "bold social policy" is needed to help the world's homeless.

USCC, council say abortion-rights suit violates First Amendment rights

Washington (NC) — A seven-year-old lawsuit against the U.S. Catholic bishops threatens the freedom of all religions to speak out on any public issue, the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference said in asking the Supreme Court to dismiss the case.

That opinion was echoed in a friend-of-the-court brief the National Council of Churches filed in support of the bishops' position. The NCC brief argued that the suit holds "profound implications for religious freedom" for all churches and "threatens core values" of the First Amendment.

"From beginning to end, this case is a First Amendment nightmare," the NCC claimed.

In their request for dismissal, the Catholic bishops said that letting the case continue could lead to similar suits "by virtually anyone who disagrees with the statements of any religious organization on a broad range of moral issues that confront the American

public." The brief, submitted by attorneys for the bishops' twin national organizations, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the U.S. Catholic Conference, was released by the NCCB-USCC on February 3, six days after it was filed.

The high court agreed last December to hear the case. Oral arguments are expected this spring, with a decision expected from the court before its current term ends this summer.

At issue is whether Abortion Rights Mobilization and other groups and individuals who back legalized abortion had the right to sue the Internal Revenue Service over the Catholic Church's tax exemption and to subpoena the NCCB-USCC for internal Church documents.

The use of court power to force revelation of the Church's internal communications "has an undeniable impact upon the Catholic

Church's rights of free speech and free exercise of religion," the bishops' attorneys said.

The challenged lawsuit was originally filed in 1980 by Abortion Rights Mobilization and others who favor legalized abortion. They alleged that Catholic organizations have backed pro-life political candidates, violating IRS regulation that prohibit politicking by religious organizations.

The plaintiffs claimed that by failing to revoke the Church's tax exemption, the IRS gave preferential treatment to Catholic anti-abortion beliefs. They said this denigrated and stigmatized their own opposing beliefs and

harmed their ability to participate equally in the political process in support of those beliefs.

The NCCB and USCC, called into the case as witnesses representing all U.S. Catholic institutions, were ordered in 1986 to pay \$100,000 a day in fines for refusing to obey the U.S. District Court of New York's subpoenas demanding internal Church records.

The fines have been delayed pending appeals.

Abortion Rights Mobilization was expected to file its brief in response to the NCCB-USCC by late February.

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