

USCC opposes plan for reports on donors

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Catholic Conference opposes a Bush administration proposal to make churches tell the Internal Revenue Service how much money its parishioners give.

"We oppose it. We oppose any reporting requirement," Dierdre Halloran, USCC general counsel, told Catholic News Service March 10.

"It's burdensome," she said. "It's offensive. It intersects the IRS between the church and the donor, making the church an enforcer for the IRS."

The proposal — which would make churches report everyone who gives over \$500 a year — was buried deep in the 1993 budget proposal President George Bush sent to Congress in January.

It first got attention in the general news media Feb. 22. The next day Vice President Dan Quayle repudiated the plan during a national television interview.

Quayle said Bush "didn't know it was in there" and "that piece of legislation is not going to have our (administration) support."

Less than two weeks later, however, *The New York Times* reported that White House chief of staff Samuel K. Skinner told a small group of reporters March 5 that the proposal was still alive.

"It's not dead. Nobody has killed it," the *Times* quoted Skinner as saying.

Current federal law requires non-profit organizations that receive more than \$25,000 a year to inform the IRS annually of all donors contributing more than \$5,000 in money or property during that year. But the law exempts churches and their charities from the requirement.

The administration's proposal would vastly expand the reporting requirements to cover all donors of \$500 or more, and eliminate the reporting exemption for churches, synagogues, mosques and all related religious organizations.

Parishes would have to track and report the contributions of "every parishioner who gives \$10 a week," Halloran said.

In practice this means that every church would have to track the donations of "every parishioner" every year, she said, since it would be difficult to guess at the start of the year which parishioners will not reach the \$500 parishes.

According to one recent Gallup study of American charitable giving, more than one-third of those who contribute to their church or synagogue pledge a specific percentage of their annual income or a fixed amount each week.

The average giving among those church-goers ranges from around \$1,500 to \$2,000 per household, Gallup found. Those figures suggest that even by a conservative estimate, the typical

church would have to provide yearly data to the IRS on the contributions of at least a third of its members.

In early February Frank Monahan, director of the USCC Office of Government Liaison, sent an urgent memo to all state Catholic conferences in the country, asking them to make their opposition to the proposal known to the White House and Congress.

Monahan said the administration proposal would force churches and other religious agencies to obtain the Social Security or Taxpayer Identification Number from every donor who gives \$500 or more during the year.

It would require all those religious organizations to fill out the government's W-2 or 1099 forms for each \$500 donor and send copies of those reports to the IRS and the donor.

In addition, it would require any church or charity with more than 250 people on its list of \$500 donors to provide the data to the IRS on computer disk or other electronic format.

In a Feb. 13 letter, Monahan urged members of the Senate Finance Committee to oppose the proposal.

"The impact of this requirement on parish churches, with their inadequate staff and computer capabilities, would be staggering," he said.

Halloran said national Catholic organizations like Catholic Relief Services that receive many contributions by mail also would have to track all donors — and obtain their Social Security number or Tax Identification Number — in order to comply.

Halloran said the administration proposal arose in part from a legitimate concern over tax cheating by people "who received something in return" for their contributions.

As examples she cited purchases made at auctions or in the "grocery store scrip programs" that have become popular in several parts of the country recently.

In the typical scrip program, a supermarket chain sells scrip to a church at a 5 percent discount, and church members purchase it at full face value. They use it in the store to purchase goods.

The church's profit comes from the discount at which it purchased the scrip, and the parishioner who buys and uses the scrip is simply making a purchase, not a contribution, Halloran said.

But when tax time comes around and a participant in a scrip program or church auction is looking at cancelled checks worth hundreds of dollars made out to the church, "the temptation is great" to claim those purchases as charitable contributions, she said.

The USCC plainly opposes such tax cheating, Halloran said. But instead of specifically targeting such abuses, the administration proposal would hit the whole field of ordinary religious giving with a set of rules that are "ill-conceived and burdensome," she said.

Author scheduled to speak about Marian apparitions

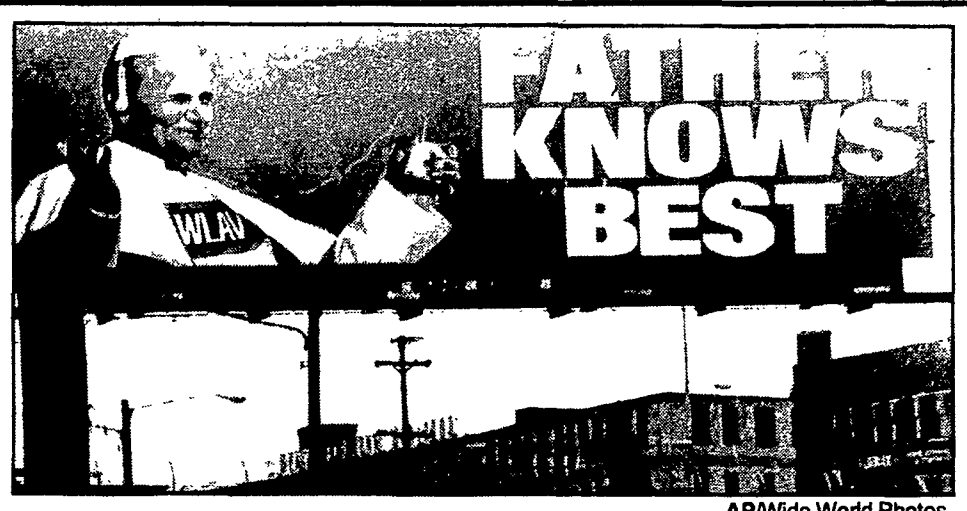
HORSEHEADS — Wayne Weible, who wrote *Medjugorje: The Message and Letters from Medjugorje*, will speak at Church of St. Mary Our Mother, 816 W. Broad St., on Thursday, April 2. The lecture is scheduled for 7 p.m.

The program is free, although free-will offerings will be accepted.

A former newspaper editor and pub-

lisher, Weible became interested in Marian apparitions at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, in 1985. Since that time he has dedicated his life to traveling around the world and detailing the alleged events occurring at Medjugorje. He and his wife converted to Catholicism in December of 1991.

Call 607/739-3817 for information.



AP/Wide World Photos
BILLBOARD CONTROVERSY — A billboard in Grand Rapids, Mich., depicts wearing Pope John Paul II headphones and a promotional T-shirt as part of an ad campaign for radio station WLAV-FM. The billboard was erected March 2 in the city of 180,000 people — of whom 64,000 are Catholic.

Dismayed Irish bishops charge ruling rendered abortion 'legal'

DUBLIN, Ireland (CNS) — The Irish Catholic bishops acknowledged March 11 that a crisis over abortion has arisen in Ireland and urged citizens to support legislators in finding a solution.

The bishops, reacting to an Irish Supreme Court ruling that a 14-year-old rape victim could have an abortion in Britain, said they shared widespread dismay at the decision. Judges said they feared the girl would kill herself if she did not end the pregnancy.

"The understanding of the Irish people was that the right to life of the unborn was protected by the constitution in such a way as to render abortion illegal," the bishops said after a three-day meeting at Maynooth, near Dublin.

"Abortion has now been declared to be legal," they said. "The consequences are, from every point of view, extremely grave."

In a press statement, the bishops said they have a duty to contribute to building a society that reflects the dig-

nity of human beings in the light of the Gospel. Abortion is a matter of justice that involves the most basic of all human rights, the right to life, they said.

"A particularly urgent challenge now faces our legislators, as they seek to exercise their responsibility to protect the lives of unborn children, who are the weakest and most voiceless members of our human family," the statement continued.

"The matter is of the utmost importance and must be addressed without delay. Legislators need and deserve the support of every citizen in discharging this fundamental responsibility," it said.

In a 1983 referendum, Irish voters decided by a 2-1 majority to amend the constitution to make abortion illegal.

However, opinion polls since the 14-year-old rape victim's case show that a majority of Irish people now would accept some sort of limited abortion in Ireland in special circumstances such as rape or incest.

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Bishop Gasparini and friend

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