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President Bill Clinton signs the Family Leave Bill Feb. 5, as Vicki Yandle looks on. Yandle lost her job in Marietta, Ga., when she needed a leave to care for a sick daughter.

Bishop calls family leave modest step

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The family leave legislation signed into law Feb. 5 by President Bill Clinton was labeled by a Catholic official as a modest step which "strikes a cord of justice."

"This bill affirms family life; it demonstrates a respect for basic human dignity," said Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, chairman of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Committee on Domestic Policy.

The bishop called the Family and Medical Leave Act "a modest first step at placing workers and their families among our nation's top priorities."

Bishop Ricard said U.S. Catholic bishops have been among the earliest promoters of family and medical leave and added that they welcomed this legislation "as a beginning step in shaping our society with a clear priority for families and children."

"Passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act sends a message that this nation wants to support family life," he said.

The family-leave legislation is the first bill to be signed by the new president. Effective in six months, it requires businesses with more than 50 employees to grant up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to employees to care for a newborn or newly adopted child, or to deal with illness in the family. During the leaves, the employers must guarantee the worker's job and provide health insurance.

The measure was passed in the House Feb. 3 on a 246-152 vote. On Feb. 4 it passed the Senate 71-27. Former President George Bush twice vetoed the bill, calling it an unwarranted government intrusion into business practices.

Archbishop Daniel L. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, then-president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and its policy arm, the USCC, wrote to Bush in September, 1992, urging him to sign the act into law, saying it would "help send a message that children and families come first."

After signing the legislation, Clinton said it would strengthen businesses and families. "Now millions of people will no longer have to choose between their jobs and their families," he said.

He also said it was the beginning of social legislation he wants passed, including welfare reform, tougher child-support enforcement, child-immunization programs and expanded earned-income tax credits.

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