Catholic leaders take agenda to Capitol Hill

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON – Catholic social ministry leaders from across the country talked Feb. 27 about how to take "putting families first" and other elements of the Catholic social agenda to Capitol Hill during their annual national meeting.

Nearly 300 leaders from national Catholic organizations and diocesan Catholic Charities, social service and peace and justice offices were in Washington for four days of work – including an afternoon of lobbying on the Hill.

Most had made advance appointments to meet the afternoon of Feb. 27 or 28 with members of Congress from their state.

The lobbying session is a regular feature of the annual gathering, but this was the first since the election of the new Republican majority in Congress. Influencing legislators to craft a welfare reform policy that does not hurt children was one of the top priorities of the social ministry leaders.

Along with a wide list of domestic issues, they were also concerned about reshaping and revitalizing U.S. foreign aid in a post-Cold War world and curbing the U.S. arms trade around the world, particularly the export and use of land mines.

But they planned to approach their lobbying with a difference. "This is not just a political game. We are a community of faith," said John Carr, director of the U.S. Catholic Conference Department of Social Development and World Peace, one of the sponsors of the meeting.

Reviewing the recent record of Democrats and Republicans on issues where Catholic teaching calls for social support for the weak and vulnerable, Carr said, "I fear both parties are running away from the common ground we share with them."

In light of those trends, he said, he was tempted to describe the assemblage of Catholic social leaders in front of him as "a self-help group for the politically incorrect."

"Who else," he asked, "stands up for both the unborn and the undocumented, for the children on welfare and the children in the womb, against the violence of abortion and the vengeance of capital punishment?"

"What other community," he added, "opposes both assault weapons in our country and condoms in our schools? Who else resists the growing isolationism abroad and the indifference to the poor at home? Who else supports trade unions at home and generous foreign assistance around the world?

"Who else brings to the welfare debate a commitment to work and family and responsibility and a sense of solidarity and an option for the poor?"

"We don't fit very well (in U.S. political alignments)," he said. "We didn't fit very well two years ago, and we don't fit very well today. We don't fit categories of right or left, Democrat or Republican. And our values are being tested across the spectrum."

Carr urged the social ministry leaders to present their senators and representatives with policy positions, developed out of the tradition of Catholic social teaching, which are "principled but not ideological ... political but not partisan."

Nancy Wisdo, director of the USCC Office of Domestic Social Development, urged the participants to advocate a humane reform of welfare.

"It's important to establish that you are for reform. We should not let anyone take away the moral high ground from the Catholic community," she said.

"We are for real reform that strengthens families, rewards work and protects children," she said. "We know that the current system fails these criteria in many ways."

She cited food stamps and Aid to Families with Dependent Children as critical for the protection of children.

In the debate over abandoning the entitlement approach to food stamps and AFDC, she asked, "Why is the concept of 'entitlement' politically incorrect when it comes to children?"

Ms. Wisdo warned that many reform proposals risk abandonment of federal standards and guidelines that it took years to establish.

She said the social ministry leaders should use their own experiences in their home dioceses and their expertise on the local scene to "put a human face" on the welfare issues, driving home to legislators the local impact that various changes would have.

Carr said the church maintains an effective advocacy by insisting on the same fundamental principles and vision of society regardless of who is in power.

"This is a new Congress, but our mission and message are not very new," he said. "We are a community of faith, not an interest group. We are a church, not a lobby. We don't recast our principles, reinvent our agenda or redefine our vision in terms of the election returns, focus groups or overnight polling."

"Our church has been called many things," he added, "but nobody has ever called us trendy."

Jesuit Father Drew Christianson, director of the USCC Office of International Justice and Peace, acknowledging that domestic issues would be the primary interest on Capitol Hill for most of the group, urged them to focus on two specific foreign policy issues – foreign aid and the arms trade.

He outlined the USCC's policy concerns on foreign aid, urging the group to remind legislators that polls show Americans support increased foreign aid for peace and development when they learn how little of the federal budget actually goes to those purposes.

AP/Wide World Photos

Lost childhood

Amkhad, a 5-year old Chechen boy, displays a small toy gun and a discarded syringe Feb. 16, in the village of Samashky, Chechnya, which is located west of Grozny. Amkhad is one of only a few children whose families have not fled in a month of clashes between villagers and Russian troops.

Ulster peace

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is the latest effort to heal the Northern Ireland conflict in which about 3,000 lives have been lost in 25 years.

In the early 1980s, Hume urged that a New Ireland Forum be established to help political parties in Ireland understand Unionist fears and to help them understand the kind of society where Unionists would feel comfortable. The forum was started in 1983 by Hume's party and the three main Irish Republic parties. In 1984 it produced a report which made little impression on Unionists.

This was followed by a 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement which gave Ireland a voice but no vote in certain Northern Ireland affairs. It also set up an intergovernment conference promoting relations and cooperation between the Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The arrangement triggered massive Unionist protests.

Unionists have said that the British government has been too accommodating to Nationalists and too insensitive to the Unionist point of view. The government, in turn, has offered assurances that any changes will depend on consent or agreement of the people of Northern Ireland.

Throughout, the Irish Republican Army engaged in recurring violence aimed at establishing an all-Irish republic. But the Unionists were equally determined that Northern Ireland should retain its ties with Britain.

The result was that Nationalist and Unionist views appeared utterly irreconcilable.

Northern Irish politicians are not accustomed to seeking compromise. In fact, compromise has usually been considered a form of weakness or even betrayal.

Things slowly began evolving after the IRA announced a cease-fire last fall.

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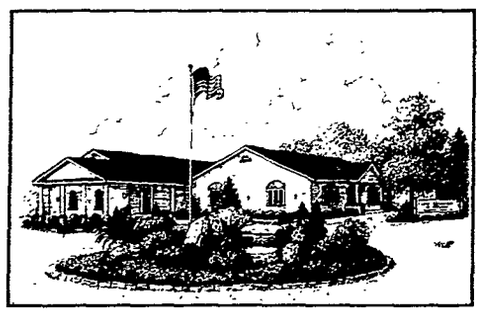

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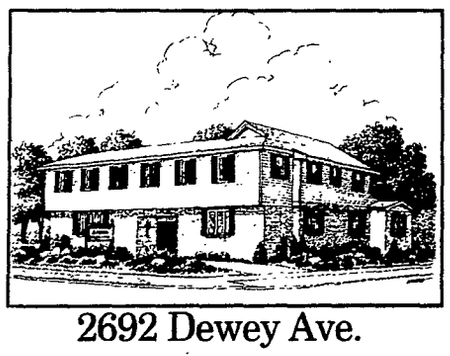

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