

Budget cuts pit young against old

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A little more than 50 days into the 104th Congress, many view the decisions being made at committee level as abandoning children to the interests of the elderly.

"The Republicans know that children are not old enough to vote so they have targeted the school lunch program, the school breakfast program, child-care programs and WIC (the Women, Infants and Children supplemental food program)," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., at a Feb. 23 rally and press conference at the Capitol.

More than two dozen members of the House and Senate came to the rally to express firm opposition to the part of the GOP's "Contract with America" that would replace many federal nutrition programs with community block grants to the states.

Although some programs for the elderly were originally slated for cuts as part of the block-grants proposal, those programs were saved after a roar of protest from the 30 million-member American Association of Retired Persons.

"Children can't buy \$50,000-a-plate dinners" as did Republicans at a recent fund-raiser, said Rep. Patricia Schroeder, D-Colo. "We now know who's for kids and who's just kidding."

But the issue goes far beyond partisan politics, said Jesuit Father Fred Kammer, president of Catholic Charities USA, in remarks at the rally about the food stamp program, which is also at risk under the block-grants plan.

"Whether Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, Americans care about children, elders and families who are less fortunate and hungry," he said.

Calling food stamps "this nation's final refuge against hunger," he said,

"Block grants will destroy this program and America will see one long bread line from coast to coast."

House leaders indicated Feb. 24 that they were abandoning the attempt to make food stamps a state-run program. They said, however, that they would reform the program to tighten eligibility and cut an estimated \$3 billion yearly in fraud.

Nancy Wisdo, director of domestic social development for the U.S. Catholic Conference, said some in Congress are setting up "false choices" in the budget debates.

"We shouldn't have to make the choice between helping the poor elderly and helping poor children," she said. "Why does it have to be either/or?"

The U.S. bishops made a similar point in their 1991 pastoral letter, "Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World."

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Bishops' committee meets with sexual abuse victims

WASHINGTON — Gathering in Washington Feb. 19-20, the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse met for the first time with individual victims of clergy sex abuse and with two victims' groups. Representatives of Linkup, a Chicago-based support and advocacy group for victims, said their session with the committee was helpful and constructive. "It was a historic meeting," said Dennis Gaboury, Linkup president since August. In comparison with two or three years ago, he said, the bishops "are a lot more cognizant of the problems and all the dimensions of this issue." David Clohessy of St. Louis, of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, called SNAP's session with the committee "hard" and "at times tense." But he said, "I think both sides were more honest with each other than we've been before."

Diocese of Harrisburg to reduce parishes by 26

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Bishop Nicholas C. Dattilo of Harrisburg has announced a restructuring plan to reduce the number of diocesan parishes and missions from 125 to 99. The changes followed three years of study and will take effect July 1. They include the suppression of four parishes and mergers affecting 39 others, with the result of creating 12 new parishes and one new mission.

Irish primate issues call for balanced discussions

ARMAGH, Northern Ireland — Cardinal Cahal Daly of Armagh has asked both sides in Northern Ireland to use a document drafted by the British and Irish governments as a framework for political discussions on the future of Northern Ireland. The document is not a victory or defeat for either side, said the cardinal, who is primate of all Ireland. To start discussions the document has to contain less than the full demands of either side while achieving a balance between the two, he said. This means equal recognition of the full political and constitutional legitimacy of British and Irish traditions in Northern Ireland, the cardinal said during a Feb. 19 homily.

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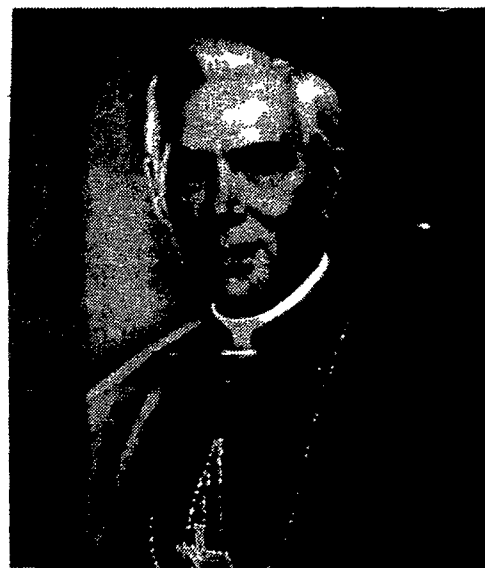


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