

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## 'Lambs' pray in prison, will appeal conviction

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Father Norman Weslin, OS, leader of the pro-life Lambs of Christ, said his fellow inmates at Niagara County Jail in Lockport can't understand why he and three fellow Lambs are there.

"They're all supportive," he said of the other prisoners in a phone interview June 16 from jail with the *Catholic Courier*. "They think the most heinous thing that can happen is the killing of a baby."

To prevent just such an act is why he and his fellow incarcerated Lambs blocked entrances to the offices of Planned Parenthood of Rochester and the Genesee Valley last December, Father Weslin said.

"We wouldn't do this for any other reason," the 66-year-old itinerant priest said. "It's not nice being in jail."

The four, along with seven other Lambs, were convicted June 9 by a federal judge in Rochester of violating the FACE Act — Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act. The other seven were sentenced to community service.

Along with Father Weslin, Dwight Monaghan of Los Angeles drew a 120-day prison sentence. Daniel Lamantain-Leatherman of Perris, Calif., and Arnold Matheson of Poughkeepsie each drew sentences of 60 days. Father Weslin said officials at the jail have treated them professionally and humanely.

All four inmates have lengthy arrest records related to their civil disobedience at abortion protests, a factor U.S. District Judge David G. Larimer cited when he sentenced them to jail.

A member of the Lambs' defense team, A. Lawrence Washburn of New York City, said he has filed an appeal of the protesters' convictions with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

In his appeal, Washburn said he cited the protesters' First Amendment rights of religion and speech, in part, to challenge the constitutionality of FACE. He added that



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Armed with their rosaries, members of the Lambs of Christ, (right to left) Father Norman Weslin, Daniel Lamantain-Leatherman, Arnold Matheson and Dwight Monaghan have begun their sentences at Niagara County Jail, Lockport, N.Y.

he will also argue that the protesters did not intend to violate the law but simply wanted to protect unborn babies when they blockaded Planned Parenthood.

Regardless of the appeal's outcome, Father Weslin said he has no intention of ending his non-violent actions against abortion clinics. He's been arrested for such protests 60-70 times around the country.

"I'll keep going to put my body in between the baby and the baby-killer," he said.

He added that he felt Judge Larimer's decision against the protesters was an attempt to crush civil disobedience.

"Civil disobedience is as American as apple pie," he said.

The priest said he and his fellow Lambs are imprisoned in double-bunk cells that are part of a 56-inmate circular section of the prison. The Lambs recite several rosaries a day as well as the Liturgy of the Hours, he said, and are currently seeking permission to celebrate Mass daily.

Father Weslin added that he is on a 40-day water-only fast.

"It's not a protest, it's a spiritual fast," he said, likening it to Gospel stories of Jesus fasting 40 days in the desert. Father Wes-

lin, who has been in jail dozens of times, said this is his fourth such extended fast.

The priest added that the "U.S. government has turned satanic" in its desire to prosecute pro-life protesters who engage in civil disobedience against abortion clinics. He said he believed the federal government was out to crush the pro-life movement against such clinics.

"Why did a federal judge put a Roman Catholic priest and three harmless Lambs of Christ in federal prison for trying to stop the killing of one of Jesus Christ's babies?" he asked rhetorically.

## Religious leaders voice concern for welfare reform

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A contingent of Monroe County religious leaders — including Bishop Matthew H. Clark — released a statement June 11 expressing concern over New York's welfare reform proposals and suggesting principles to guide the process.

The leaders released their statement at a press conference in the Dugan Center of St. Mary's Church, 15 St. Mary's St.

The statement comes as the New York State Legislature ponders welfare reform proposals put forth by Gov. George Pataki and the state Assembly. Under federal mandates, the state must reform its own welfare system by July 1, or, according to a legislative source, could face some loss of federal funding.

Representing nearly every major Christian denomination in the county, as well as its Jewish and Muslim communities, the leaders pointed out that their denominations currently provide a variety of social services from food cupboards to refugee assistance. The leaders expressed fear that such services may become overwhelmed in the wake of proposed cutbacks in welfare benefits.

For example, Christopher R. Wilkins, director of development for Catholic Charities in Steuben County, pointed out that a study of 15 diocesan parishes' outreach services from September to December 1996 recorded a sharp increase in demand for food, transportation, shelter and clothing. If welfare benefits are severely cut by the state, he said, parishes will not be able to handle further increases in the demand for services.

Meanwhile, in a phone interview from his Albany office, Joseph Buttigieg, associate director of New York State Catholic Charities, told the *Catholic Courier* that Catholic outreach programs statewide saw a 30 percent increase in demand for services last fall and winter.

"We're being so stretched right now that we're giving people three days' worth of food when they really need seven days' worth," he said.

The Rochester-area religious leaders said they wanted the state's leaders to consider four key principles when framing the state's welfare programs:

- *Opposition to arbitrary time limits on assistance:* "(N)o single time limit is right for all recipients, given varying levels of education and child care demands," the statement read. "Allowing flexibility in welfare rules will provide families and individuals with the best opportunity to become independent."

- *Support of wage supplementation for working families:* The statement called for a minimum wage increase as well as expansion of the state's earned income tax credit.

The statement also called for creation of a refundable child tax credit for parents and guardians.

The statement supported the Child Assistance Program, which allows welfare recipients to move to work without losing health and child care benefits, and called for the creation of similar programs that reward work without removing benefits.

- *Maintenance of a safety net for unemployed persons:* The statement recommended creating a safety net for all people unable to work due to disabilities, some of whom, the statement said, do not qualify under the new, more rigid Social Security regulations.

- *Support for inclusion of immigrants:* Bishop Clark noted the leaders opposed any proposals to deny benefits to immigrants, and the statement said, "immigrants have the basic rights to education, healthcare and social services."

"It's been a tendency throughout our history to ... blame them for our problems ... and to solve our problems on their backs," the bishop said of immigrants.

Although a state welfare reform law is due by July 1, Buttigieg expressed two con-

cerns — that a bill passed on time would be put together hastily and without sufficient reflection on its consequences, and that a bill might not be passed until next year.

"One of the rumors is that (the legislature) may not do anything at all this year," he said. He added that negotiations over the state's rent control laws had eclipsed talks on other issues.

Whether or not a reform law emerges this year, the chairman of the state Senate's social services committee said at least some of the Rochester-area religious leaders' concerns should be addressed by the final bill.

In a statement faxed by his office to the *Courier*, Republican Sen. Joseph R. Holland of New York City predicted that the Child Assistance Program, for example, would be expanded under a final bill.

"We are sympathetic to the fact that self-sufficiency can't happen overnight and that benefits ... will need to be made available to families in transition," he wrote.

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