

Politics

Continued from page 1

The diocese has taken stances on such issues as abortion, health care reform, end-of-life decisions and the death penalty. Bishop Matthew H. Clark meets with legislators regularly to promote the church's stances on these and other political issues.

On a national level, groups of bishops and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops have taken positions on such issues as the Persian Gulf War, economic injustice and immigration policies. On Sept. 16, for example, the Administrative Committee of the NCCB — including Bishop Clark — issued a statement urging that the U.S. Senate override President Bill Clinton's veto of a ban on partial-birth abortions.

Church leaders have sometimes been criticized for speaking out on public issues — as happened when the U.S. bishops issued their 1983 encyclical, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response." But they point to the church's teachings to support their actions.

"In the Catholic tradition, citizenship is a virtue; participation in the political process is an obligation. We are not a sect fleeing the world, but a community of faith called to renew the earth," the United States Catholic Conference declared in its 1996 document, "Political Responsibility."

"It is the Church's role as a community of faith to call attention to the moral and religious dimension of secular issues, to keep alive the values of the Gospel as a norm for social and political life, and to point out the demands of the Christian faith for a just transformation of society," it continues.

The bishops call for people to register to vote, to study the issues and candidates' positions, to vote responsibly and "to join with others in advocating for the common good."

"That's a direct call from our bishops telling us it is not only our right, it's our responsibility," explained Kathleen Gallagher, associate director of the New York State Catholic Conference. "I really believe from a Bible perspective that we are called to be involved."

Problems today have become so much larger and more complex that they need the church to bring its moral perspective to the political arena — and not just rely on such traditional church responses as running soup kitchens and offering shelter, Gallagher contended.

"The problems are so massive that they cannot be remediated by only individual acts of Christian charity," she remarked.

Father Robert Werth — whose political



activism has included protests against abortion and nuclear weapons, and more recently, involvement with Interfaith Action — argued that there are three reasons for the church to be active in the public arena.

"The first reason would be what we do in church is not something that we're hiding behind closed doors like some secret society," noted the pastor of the Catholic Community of the Nineteenth Ward, which consists of St. Augustine's, St. Monica's and Our Lady of Good Counsel churches.

"Second, I believe that with Vatican II, Jesus Christ walked out of the tabernacle, out into the church body, out the door and into the community," Father Werth continued. "Thirdly, if the church is going to be a viable presence in the neighborhoods, the Gospel message has to be shared."

How involved?

Although Catholics are called to be involved in the political arena, questions arise how far that involvement should extend.

On a practical level, the church in the United States is governed by the Internal Revenue Service's regulations concerning tax-exempt organizations, Gallagher said.

"At its simplest level, the church can do and say anything it wants with regards to issues," she noted. "The church cannot do or say anything it wants in terms of people."

Thus, for example, parishes can hold voter registration drives, can distribute literature about issues, can even hold candidate forums — as long as all the candidates in a race are invited.

In the same vein, church officials and organizations can, likewise, take stances on issues — without endorsing candidates.

Suzanne Schnittman, consistent life ethic coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester, pointed out that the Synod goal that led to the creation of her office calls for the diocese to "advocate" for the consistent life ethic. "Advocate," she noted, "means to speak for someone who doesn't have a voice."

As part of its efforts to address public issues, in 1994 the diocese established the Public Policy Committee. Each year, the committee, which consists of people from across the diocese, recommends to Bishop

Clark areas for public advocacy. That advocacy generally involves education efforts and letter, postcard or petition drives. The committee is currently surveying people across the diocese to help determine what issues need diocesan attention.

But some Catholics go even further in their public advocacy — to the point of being arrested and even jailed.

The pope has endorsed such actions in some circumstances.

In his 1975 encyclical, "The Gospel of Life," he declared, for example, that when it comes to laws permitting abortion and euthanasia, "There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead, there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection."

Schnittman pointed out that such civil disobedience must be carried out in a non-violent way. And, she noted, the Diocese of Rochester has publicly supported the right of Catholics to commit civil disobedience.

In a December 1989 statement, the diocese declared that concerning abortion protests, it "supports the right of its laity, religious and priests who, after prayer and reflection, make a conscience decision to engage in non-violent disobedience."

Bringing it home

While Catholic teachings do allow for acts of civil disobedience, most Catholics are not likely to find themselves involved in such activities. Many, however, may find themselves undertaking forms of activism like the ones taken by Riola and the people of Holy Rosary Parish in their efforts to improve their neighborhood.

Brian Kane is trying to see that parishioners have the tools to carry such efforts.

While working at the Catholic Family Center, Kane helped to launch the Social Action Network, which, in 1974, evolved into Interfaith Action. In 1976, the organization separated amicably from the Catholic Family Center, and in fact, still receives Thanks Giving Appeal funds through the Catholic Charities office.

Currently, the 12 member congregations of Interfaith Action include in Rochester the three parishes of the Catholic Community of the Nineteenth Ward, Holy Rosary, St. Rita's, and St. John the Evangelist on Humboldt, and in Rochester's suburbs, St. John the Evangelist, Spencerport, and Holy Ghost, Gates.

Kane explained that the Catholic Family Center had begun the effort with the idea of "empowering" people. According to Kane, the emphasis was and is not on large political issues — such as abortion and nuclear weapons — but on "small p" issues, "issues that people deal with on a daily basis.

The issues that affect people's daily lives."

Thus in the past year, for example, Interfaith Action was involved with Most Precious Blood Parish's successful effort to fight a strip club in its Rochester neighborhood; lobbied with St. John the Evangelist Parish, Spencerport, for senior housing in the village; worked with Holy Ghost parishioners in Gates to push for traffic safety improvements on Coldwater Road; helped St. Augustine parishioners secure improved street lighting on Chili Avenue.

The goal of Interfaith Action is to prepare people to take the lead — indeed, during "actions," Interfaith Action officials purposely remain in the background and allow the people in the community to speak and direct the activities. To help prepare them, the staff provides leadership training, teaching them how to do research, how to conduct public actions, how to conduct conversation with public officials.

Father Werth applauds this approach.

"The political system has become disconnected from the common people," he said. "It's becoming too big and unwieldy."

Although he has been involved in protesting larger issues, he is now convinced the Interfaith Action approach, "is the best thing I've ever seen in terms of affecting change."

Rather than leading to confrontation, the approach leads to respectful dialogue, which helps to lower the tension levels.

Gallagher said both approaches — confronting larger political issues or focusing on local concerns — fit under Catholic teachings.

"Neither strategy is wrong," Gallagher said. "Neither strategy is right. St. Paul said we all have different gifts. We all have different gifts to persuade."

As the U.S. bishops noted in their 1996 statement, members of the church have an obligation to use those gifts.

"We believe that the Church has a proper role and responsibility in public affairs flowing from its gospel mandate and its respect for the dignity of the human person," they wrote. "We urge Christians to provide courageous leadership in promoting a spirit of responsible political involvement and a commitment to the common good."

Riola, for one, is a believer.

"The church is not just a venerable old institution," he said. "The church is people. The church is a living, breathing dynamic entity."

And it is an entity that has to be active in people's daily lives working for the good of the community, he said.

"If you live the Gospel, you have to believe we are all brothers and sisters," he said.

COURIER CLASSIFIEDS

GENERAL	GENERAL	GENERAL	SERVICES	SERVICES	SERVICES
Announcements ADOPTIONS The Catholic Courier does not publish adoption advertising. To obtain a list of agencies that serve birth mothers and adoptive parents, call 716-328-4340. Agencies wishing to be included on this list may send information to the Catholic Courier.	Help Wanted WANTED: RETIRED PERSON FOR SECRETARY DUTIES AT INTERPRETING SERVICE. WORK AT HOME/FLAT RATE CONTRACT AFTER TRAINING CALL MIKE 256-6216	Wanted to Buy <i>Furniture, Trunks, Clocks, Sterling and China, Linens.</i> <i>Wanted: complete estates and households. Sell to me for cash or I will conduct a sale for you.</i> Marilyn's Antiques 716-647-2480	Financial Services MORTGAGES • Purchase • Refinance Riverview Mortgage Corp. Registered NYS Mortgage Broker NYS Banking Department Loans arranged through third party lenders (716) 424-2040	Masonry MASONRY REPAIR: brick steps, sidewalks, basements, patchwork. Reasonable. 35 yrs. exp. etc. 716-323-1007. Al Meyvis, Sr.	Roofing Siding & Gutters BOWMAN ROOFING & SIDING CO. Established 1912 George R. Bowman, Sr. • Roof Repairs • Siding • • Replacement Windows • • Seamless Aluminum Gutters • • Gutter Cleaning • Ice Problems • 671-3270 671-2912
Miscellaneous Clean, safe, filtered INTERNET ACCESS <i>Blocks bad sites before it enters your home.</i> Call Family Voice 716.454.0450	Situations Wanted NURSE'S AID AVAILABLE 20 years' experience, Rochester area only, references available. 716/482-7209.	GENERAL Resort Property FT. MYERS BEACH, "FL's quiet coast" super view, on the beach, 2 br pool, 202/333-4155.	Heating & Air Conditioning Hicks Home Heating <i>Call us for Winter Comfort!</i> Heat & Air Conditioning Specialists • Sales • Service • Installation Family Owned & Operated 424-4848	Moving & Hauling K-D Moving & Storage, Inc. Experience in office, household moving and deliveries. <i>Big or Small, We do them All!</i> 473-6610/473-4357 23 Arlington St. Rochester NY 14607 NYDOT#9657	Painting & Wallcovering Al Meyvis Jr. Interior/Exterior Painting garages, porches, small homes, basement walls repaired, wet basement problems, gutters cleaned, all types of home repair. Small jobs welcome • Senior Discount 716-392-4435 • 323-2876
MOMS "R" US newsletter for moms. For a free copy, please call Marie Marton at (716) 787-0474.	Miscellaneous NEXT TO NEW SALE Our Lady of Lourdes school hall. 165 Rhinecliff (off Monroe). Oct. 15-17. Clothing, jewelry, books, furniture, housewares, etc. Thurs. 9am-8pm, Fri. 9am-5pm, Sat 8:00am-noon. \$5 per bag all day Saturday.	GENERAL Ceiling Repair TEXTURED/SWIRLED CEILINGS 9' x 12' ceiling only \$59. Water Damage, drywall, plaster repairs. Quality work; reasonable prices. 716-392-5076.	Home Improvement CARPENTRY: Handyman service. Will do odd jobs. No job too small. Call Ken 716-247-8785.	Check the Courier Classifieds for all your home improvement needs!	

Call 716-328-4340 to advertise in the Courier Classifieds!