

WORLD & NATION

Bishops, social ministry leaders lobby in Albany

By Kate Blain
Catholic News Service

ALBANY, N.Y. — The bishops of New York — including Bishop Matthew H. Clark — and more than 1,000 Catholics converged on Albany March 9 to lobby their legislators about health care, abortion, welfare, education and other policy issues.

At a press conference during the day-long Public Policy Forum, which also featured strategy meetings and a Mass, Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany sharply criticized attacks on Catholic health care.

"Other health care agencies do not have the pressures put on them that Catholic agencies have," Cardinal O'Connor said. "We believe that every person is made in the image and likeness of God. There are those who demand that either we reject our principles, or we will be driven out of business. Well, we're not going to give up. We believe that our moral and ethical approach is very respectful of all the people of New York."

He said Catholics "have a very serious vested interest" in the character of New York health care because "we take care of approximately 20 percent of patients in the state."

Bishop Hubbard said that attacks on Catholic health care are being organized by Planned Parenthood and other organizations that are "rabid in their concern for reproductive freedom."

He said there are numerous other services that some hospitals provide and others do not, but abortion is being singled out as a "litmus test" for whether a health care agency adequately provides for the needs of its patients.

Cardinal O'Connor said Catholic health institutions are also confronting new challenges in serving the poor because of reductions in Medicare and Medicaid.

Bishop Hubbard said partial-birth abortion and assisted suicide were among issues forum participants would discuss with legislators.

Partial-birth abortion is a "barbaric procedure" that lawmakers should ban, as they would "any form of child abuse," he said.

He also took issue with proponents of physician-assisted suicide, saying: "We remain gravely concerned that states may follow the tragic lead of the state of Oregon."

While 15 people in Oregon have taken their lives since the practice was legalized there, he said, "there continue to be 350,000 residents of Oregon without basic health care."

Laura Casell, Catholic Charities director of the Rockville Centre Diocese, told the reporters that services for former welfare recipients were another concern of the Catholic lobbyists. They were there, she said, to "remind legislators there are indeed human faces behind the budget numbers."

She said that after a 36 percent drop in state welfare cases since 1996, Catholic Charities and other church agencies have seen record numbers of requests for aid.

She said forum participants would ask for expansion of the earned income tax credit, funding for transportation, health care and child care, and state partnerships with the private sector to create more jobs.

Casell also called for a statewide tracking study of welfare recipients to find out what happens to them after they go off

welfare.

Also at the press conference was Sister Jane Herb, an Immaculate Heart of Mary nun who is Albany diocesan superintendent of schools.

She called funding for education "one of the most perplexing issues facing New York."

Sister Herb urged the Legislature to establish an education investment tax credit for corporations and individuals that donate to public and nonpublic schools. She said that idea — sparked by the State Education Committee in 1993 — was one "whose time has come. It would go a long way to support valuable programs. It would lighten the burden on New York state's taxpayers."

The Public Policy Forum is an annual event that regularly draws more than 1,000 Catholics to the state Capitol to advocate changes in state laws and policies. Bishop Hubbard said it is "not just a one-day shot for the Catholic Church, but an ongoing process of advocacy."

Cardinal O'Connor called it part of the church's "responsibility to contribute to the formation of policy so it will be in the

interest of all people."

In addition to the forum's targeted issues, Bishop Hubbard commented on his recent efforts to change the drug laws passed during the administration of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller.

The laws "have not been successful. They have targeted, in many instances, low-level people in the drug trade," he said. "Many of these are not violent offenders (and) would profit more from treatment than incarceration."

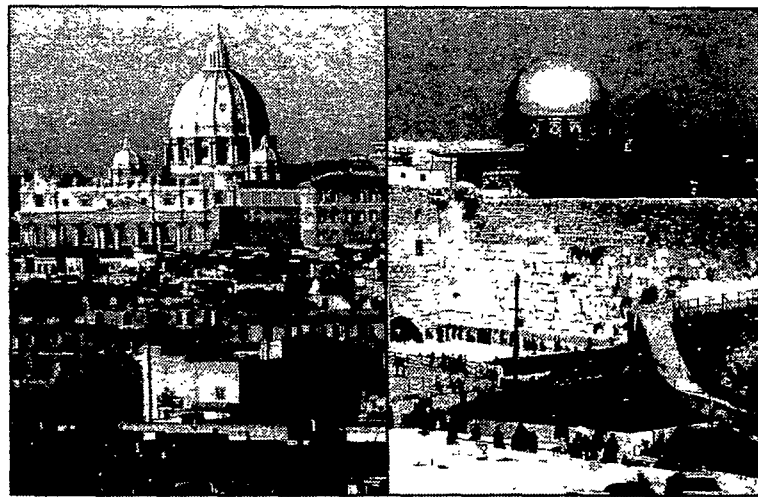
Joining Bishop Clark in representing the Diocese of Rochester at the forum were Jack Balinsky, diocesan director of Catholic Charities; Joe Kenney, Catholic Family Center's director of social policy and research, along with CFC staff members and clients; Scarlett Emerson, Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes' parish and community development coordination, along with social ministry volunteers and staff; Kathleen Dubel, Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier's director of justice and peace, with volunteers and staff; and Father Brian Cool, co-pastor of St. Michael's Parish, Penn Yan, and St. Andrew's Parish, Dundee.



Reuters/CNS

Kosovo conflict spreads

Albanian women and children cross a snow-covered field as they flee combat in the Drenica region of Kosovo March 20. The pope urged a peaceful end to the fighting, but NATO airstrikes seemed imminent March 23.



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