

Bills may force church to close its institutions

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

If signed into law, bills recently passed in both chambers of the New York state legislature could force Catholic hospitals, schools and charitable agencies out of business, according to the New York State Catholic Conference.

That's because both bills would force New York employers to include coverage in their group health insurance for artificial contraception, abortifacients and certain fertility treatments the church opposes. The church would be unable to operate many of its institutions in compliance with such laws, conference officials said.

The church's opposition to such bills



Joseph Bruno

promises to dominate the Public Policy Forum, an annual one-day visit to Albany by hundreds of church employees and volunteers to lobby state officials on various issues, according to Dennis Poust, the Catholic conference's assistant executive director. The forum is slated for March 12 and will be attended by more than 100 representatives from the Diocese of Rochester, according to Judy Taylor, communications manager for diocesan Catholic Charities.

Planners originally intended the Public Policy Forum to address such issues as aid



Sheldon Silver

for non-public schools, as well as increased funding for home health care, welfare, affordable housing, mental health and HIV/AIDS programs and services. But Poust expressed dismay that these important issues would be overshadowed by concerns about "anti-Catholic" legislation.

"It's unfortunate that the church is consistently being put in a defensive position, leaving us inadequate opportunity to focus on other issues of great importance, such as drug-sentencing reform and maintaining services for the poor and vulnerable,"

Poust said.

The bills — A.2006A, A.2214 and A.2003 in the Assembly, and S-6265 in the Senate — overwhelmingly passed the Assembly in January and the Senate on Feb. 5. They were sponsored, respectively, by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno.

The Senate bill includes a so-called "conscience clause" that is not present in the Assembly version. However, the clause is so narrow in defining what is and is not a religious institution that it essentially would exempt no church institutions other than parishes, church leaders said.

The Senate has traditionally defended the Catholic Church's right to not provide

Continued on page 14



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Inside This Week




How close are the stars to Cambodia?

Cambodian Vandin San, 42, looked up into the night sky above Wat Opot, a Buddhist temple and grounds located about 90 minutes south of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital.

"How far away are the stars?" he asked me and Wayne Matthyse, an American medic who runs a family health center and AIDS hospice at the temple.

"How close are they to the Earth?"

Wayne and I fumbled around, trying to explain the concept of light years to Vandin, who listened intently.

"Some of those stars up there," I explained, "may be sending us light that was first sent out when Angkor Wat was being built. That light is just reaching us now."

Vandin nodded his head in understanding. Everyone in Cambodia knows about Angkor Wat, the mammoth Buddhist temple built in northern Cambodia in the 12th century. It is the largest religious structure on earth.

Although Vandin didn't know anything about light years, he knows a lot about other subjects. He speaks four languages, including English, and is an expert handyman. Vandin also heads the HIV/AIDS Prevention Office of the Catholic Office of Emergency Relief and Refugees. COERR has been working with Partners in Compassion, a private group founded — in part, by Wayne — to help families affected by HIV/AIDS, which in the past few years has begun devastating Cambodia.

Continued on page 14

STORY BY ROB CULLIVAN

Catholic Courier Staff Writer Rob Cullivan traveled to Cambodia last month (Jan. 7-21), as a volunteer organizer of a project to install a water-purification system in rural Cambodia. Sarah Brownell, an engineer, was Cullivan's partner in organizing the effort, which they termed "The Cambodia Project." It operated under the auspices of the Catholic Office of Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), an agency of the Catholic bishops of Thailand, and Partners in Compassion, a private group working with HIV/AIDS patients and their families.

They installed an ultraviolet, solar-powered system at the Wat Opot Buddhist temple's health-care center in Takeo Province. The center provides hospice care for patients dying from AIDS, as well as health care and other services to families who have lost members to AIDS and often are bereft of income when a father dies. St. John the Evangelist Church, Rochester, served as the trip's official sponsor in partnership with COERR.

