

NEWS

Massachusetts joins birth-control push

By Stacie N. Galang
Catholic News Service

BOSTON — The Catholic Church in Massachusetts is the latest target of an ongoing campaign by pro-choice forces in various states who want to force church institutions to pay for artificial birth control and abortifacients for its employees.

Similar legislation has been passed by the New York state Legislature and is already law in California, where it is currently in litigation.

The Massachusetts state Senate was poised in late February to enact legislation that would require religious institutions, including Catholic Charities and Caritas Christi, the Archdiocese of Boston's health care system, to provide its employees with health care coverage that includes contraception — even contraception that could cause abortions.

The ramifications are serious, said Maria Parker, associate director of public policy for the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the four Catholic dioceses in Massachusetts.

"Catholic institutions may not take this lightly," she said.

The Senate bill would require all health care coverage in the commonwealth to include contraceptive coverage as it does hormone replacement therapy. The Catholic Church and its affiliate organizations do not provide the contraceptive benefit to their employees because the church finds artificial contraception immoral. The bill exempts only the archdiocese and directly controlled entities. An effort to broaden the exemption to include other church-affiliated institutions failed to receive enough support.

Democratic Rep. Stephen Tobin, who pushed to broaden the bill's exemptions,

said the members felt the bill contained adequate exemptions. Once enacted, the bill goes to the governor's desk, where it was expected to be signed within 10 days. The law would take effect in 2003.

"All we wanted was to give an amendment so you're not forcing the archdiocese and its related entities to be required to cover contraceptive services," Tobin said. "It's a fundamental issue for the church and the bottom line is having to carry contraceptives is supporting the termination of life."

The bill has far-reaching effects. In the commonwealth, the Catholic Church and its affiliated entities run nine colleges and universities, 12 hospitals, 28 nursing homes, 10 residential and related centers, 26 nondiocesan high schools and 62 social service centers, according to *The Official Catholic Directory* of the U.S. church.

Bills recently passed in both chambers of the New York state Legislature could force Catholic hospitals, schools and charitable agencies out of business if they become law, according to the New York State Catholic Conference. The bills mandate that employers' group health insurance plans cover artificial contraception, abortifacients and certain fertility treatments the church opposes. The church would be unable to operate its institutions in compliance with such laws, leaders said.

The New York Senate bill offers a "conscience clause" not contained in the Assembly bills. Yet the clause is so narrow in defining what is and is not a religious institution that it essentially would cover only Catholic parishes, church leaders said.

The bills promise to be the main focus of a day-long forum the Catholic conference will conduct March 12 with state leaders. More than 100 representatives of the Diocese of Rochester are expected to at-

tend.

In California, Catholic Charities of Sacramento is similarly under siege from pro-choice forces. The organization is awaiting a decision this summer by the state's highest court that would determine whether Catholic Charities would be compelled to provide contraceptive coverage to its employees.

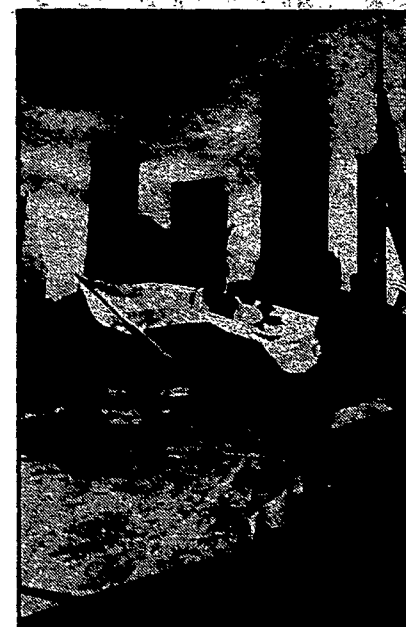
In Massachusetts, the religious institutions affected have begun to analyze the legislation, bearing in mind its intentional or unintentional effect to abridge their religious freedom, Parker said.

Tobin said the issue was painted as one of providing needed medical services to women. He said he honestly did not know how many women were affected by the lack of coverage. Backers of the legislation said they did not have the numbers either. Norma Shapiro, legislative director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, said she did not know how many people would choose to be covered.

Shapiro said the issue was about meeting the "very basic needs" of a woman. Providing coverage of contraception as well as hormone replacement therapy is just one way to make sure that such basic needs are not viewed as extraordinary, but as the ordinary needs of a woman and her body, she said.

The legislation, without the broad exemption, is part of a national strategy to force religious institutions to provide health care coverage that includes contraception. In January, the ACLU published a report, "Religious Refusals and Reproductive Rights," discussing among other things conscience clauses for religious organizations.

People who go to work in Catholic hospitals and nursing homes and universities understand at least the mission of the



Chris Sheridan/CNS

Pilgrimage

An unidentified woman waves the 2002 World Youth Day flag over the excavation site where the World Trade Center once stood in New York Feb. 25. A group of Canadians preparing for World Youth Day in Toronto this summer brought the World Youth Day cross to the site for a prayer service.

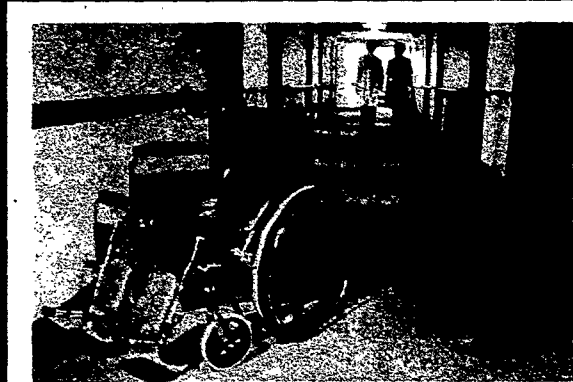
Catholic entity and, in particular, its position on abortion and contraception, Parker said.

"For someone to claim they had no idea, that would be a surprise," Shapiro said.

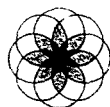
...
Contains reporting by Rob Cullivan in Rochester.

OUR PATIENTS ARE A LOT LIKE
HOTEL GUESTS.

They have a tendency to leave things behind.



Maybe it was the inability to walk after hip surgery.
Or speak because of a stroke. Whatever the condition, the experienced, caring staff at St. Ann's Transitional Care Center helped put it behind them. To learn more call 697-6000 or visit our website at www.stannscommunity.com



S T. ANN'S
TRANSITIONAL CARE CENTER
Full of Life



Alive In Christ

An Institute for the
Formation of Catechists and Adults

With special tracks for Scripture Study,
Catechetical Methodology,
and Professional Updates

Featuring:

Megan McKenna

Noted scripture scholar, author and storyteller.



March 21 and March 23 Keynote Address:

Unbind Them and Set Them Free:
Living and Proclaiming the Resurrection

Three Locations - Three Dates

March 21
St. Mary's Church
224 Franklin Street
Elmira, NY

March 22
Church of the Transfiguration
50 West Bloomfield Road
Pittsford, NY

March 23
Nazareth College
4245 East Avenue
Rochester, NY

For more information on Alive in Christ, or to register by March 8, 2002, contact the Department of Evangelization and Catechesis at (585) 328-3210 ext. 295, or visit our website at www.dor.org/departments and click on "Department of Evangelization and Catechesis."

Sponsored by the
Department of Evangelization and Catechesis
Diocese of Rochester