

DIOCESAN NEWS

Pro-life activists to meet, respond to local criticism

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

For pro-life activists in the Diocese of Rochester, this summer has been anything but a vacation, and an upcoming pro-life conference will stress the many threats the church's pro-life position currently faces in the public arena.

The national Diocesan Pro-Life Directors' Meeting is slated to take place Wednesday and Thursday, Aug. 7-8, at Adam's Mark Hotel, 120 Church St., in Buffalo. The meeting will draw pro-life directors from dioceses throughout the United States, including Jann Armantrout, life-issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester.

Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua, archbishop of Philadelphia and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities, will deliver the meeting's keynote speech at 10 a.m. on Aug. 8. Conference speakers will then address such issues as alternatives to embryo research and highlight legislative threats to Catholic health institutions seeking to uphold the church's teachings on the sanctity of life.

Among the issues to be discussed will be legislation recently passed by the New York state Legislature that, if signed by Gov. George Pataki, would mandate that Catholic schools, agencies and health institutions provide coverage for contraceptives and abortifacients in their employee group health plans.

The New York Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops, vigorously fought the legislation, terming it "anti-Catholic" and warning it could compel the church to close its institutions rather than operate them in violation of church teaching. Conference leaders, as well as national Catholic leaders, have stated they believe such legislation is designed by abortion advocates to either drive the church out of the health-services industry, or at least to create a climate in which the public will accept Catholic hospitals eventually being forced to provide abortions.

The legislation was among the issues discussed at a panel presentation sponsored by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice at Temple B'rith Kodesh in Brighton May 28. Panel members included New York state Assemblywoman Susan John, and the discussion was moderated by Rabbi Laurence Kotok, senior rabbi of Temple B'rith Kodesh.

A May 30 article in the *Brighton-Pittsford Post* quoted both John and Rabbi Kotok as making comments critical of the Catholic church's influence on public policy in the areas of abortion and "reproductive

health." John reportedly said she respected the right of the church to "follow its religious doctrine," but then said "religious view does not need to dominate public policy in New York."

The *Catholic Courier* contacted John for clarification of her comments, but had received no response as of its July 22 deadline. John was among the chief sponsors of the contraceptive coverage bill in the assembly.

The *Post* also quoted Rabbi Kotok as criticizing the church's promotion of its pro-life stance in the public-policy arena.

"The problem is when presumptive public policy is universally implied," the article quoted the rabbi as saying. "It's offensive to the Jewish and probably the Protestant communities."

When contacted by the *Courier*, Rabbi Kotok said he did not recall calling the church's actions in the public-policy arena "offensive" to Jews and Protestants. He added that he supported the right of the church — or any religious denomination, for that matter — to hold a position against abortion.

But he asked whether Catholic hospitals could truly be called Catholic if they receive most of their revenue from government sources. Most government monies for Catholic hospitals come in the form of Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement for medical services. He added that he believed it was not the role of government to uphold one church's position on an issue above those of other religious groups that may hold different positions.

Rabbi Kotok also stressed that he valued interfaith relations with Catholics, is a member of a study group of priests and rabbis, and had worked on Catholic-Jewish bodies locally, nationally and internationally.

After reading the *Post* article, Armantrout responded with a letter to the paper's editor.

"I found the article disappointing," Armantrout wrote. "Disappointing, I say, because the comments attributed to ... (Susan) John blatantly challenge the First Amendment right to free expression of religion. Disappointing, because this meeting was held at a house of worship specifically to discuss the political, legal and religious implications of abortion. Disappointing, because the Catholic Church, while criticized, was not represented on the panel."

Rabbi Kotok said that Armantrout had not contacted him before her letter appeared, and that he wished she had so that he could clarify his comments for her. He added that he believed that the meeting was "bland" and not as dramatic as it appeared to be in the *Post* article.



James Stein/Photo Intern

Markus Molitor (center) of Cologne, Germany, jokes with fellow German exchange students and youths from Webster's Holy Trinity Parish by throwing peanuts during a Rochester Red Wings baseball game at Frontier Field July 20.

Germans, local parishes form cultural exchange

By Jennifer Burke
Editorial intern

Would you travel several thousand miles to see a Rochester Red Wings baseball game? How about the attractions at Six Flags Darien Lake, Letchworth State Park, the George Eastman House or the Laser Light Show at High Falls?

That's exactly what a Catholic youth group from Cologne, Germany, has done. Fifteen members of the youth group, ranging in age from 15 to 22, arrived in Rochester July 18 for a two-week stay in the United States. During that time they will reside with host families who are parishioners of Holy Trinity in Webster, St. Joseph's in Penfield and St. Patrick's in Seneca Falls. And next summer, it is likely that members of these parishes will visit Germany.

This summer exchange program began several years ago when an exchange student from Germany spent some time in Rochester. His stay here so affected him that when he went back to Germany, he encouraged other young people to visit. A group came here from Germany in the summer of 2000, and a group from Rochester traveled to Germany in the summer of 2001.

Nancy Tschieder and her family, parishioners at Holy Trinity, were among those who visited Germany.

"I had such a wonderful time last year that I sincerely wanted to repay them for their hospitality, and I told them when I left that I would love to do the same for them. They contacted me and said, 'Would you be willing to help us organize it?'" Tschieder said.

Tschieder, the German youths and teens from the local parishes began discussing this visit in November, and in February planning began in earnest.

Katharina Bilo, a 19-year-old from Germany, also was instrumental in planning this summer's exchange.

"I worked with the German government to get funding for the program," Bilo said. Bilo hopes that this trip will help overcome the barriers of language and culture between Catholics of different nationalities. She said that it is important to see different lifestyles, if only just to reinforce the fact that there are other people and other, very different ways of living in this world.

Andreas Kaul, 21, who worked with Bilo and Tschieder to plan the event, agreed.

"I think the most important thing is for us to see how life is in the United States and experience the American way of life. Many parts are close to our life in Europe, but many parts are very different, too," Kaul said.

Among the differences Kaul pointed out is the purpose of the Germans' youth group and the way it is run.

"We (our youth group) are about 80 or 90 Mass servants," he said. "We have group meetings every week. We organize trips to Belgium, Cologne and we organize weekend retreats and bicycle tours, but our main task is to serve the Mass."

Dominic Salamida, the youth minister at Holy Trinity Parish, is glad that the exchange program allows Catholics from both countries to experience different ways of life.

"It's a great gift to the church to be able to experience different cultures," Salamida said. "Hopefully, we will get a lot more youth from the parish involved."

Although the main goals of the program are to experience different cultures and establish bonds between Catholics in different countries, each person involved has his or her own personal goals while abroad. The German youths will be kept busy while they're here, and will see many of the attractions the Rochester area has to offer. Kaul is looking forward to visiting Niagara Falls, even though he saw it when he was here two years ago.

"It's amazing," he said. "I'm studying geographics in Germany, so I can understand what's behind it."

Bilo's favorite part of the trip will be the point when she can be sure it was a success.

"It's the part in the end when you see people crying in the airport and exchanging addresses, because then you know it worked," Bilo said.

The German youths are hoping to have fun while they're here, and if the welcome picnic at Tschieder's house on July 19 is any indication, this won't be a problem. The laughter and excited chatter that filled the backyard were punctuated by frequent splashes as people jumped into the pool. Even while they're having fun, they don't forget to be thankful for this opportunity and to appreciate the hard work that went into planning it.

"I think what's very important is to thank all the host families, and especially Nancy Tschieder, who organized this," Kaul said.

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