

Catholics lobby leaders

Delegates concerned about range of issues

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

More than 700 representatives of the Catholic Church converged in Albany March 11 to express their concerns about New York state's budget crisis and its effects on Catholic Charities, as well as the Legislature's continuing attacks on Catholic belief through various proposed health-insurance mandates.

The Public Policy Forum, an annual lobbying event at the state capital, is sponsored by the New York State Catholic Conference, the public-policy arm of the state's eight bishops. About 75 representatives of the Diocese of Rochester attended this year's forum, according to Jack Balinsky, diocesan director of Catholic Charities.

Forum participants met with their state legislators and their staffs throughout the day. Among the issues of concern for church representatives were increasing access to health insurance for the uninsured; restoration of funding cuts in the area of mental health services; en-

actment of the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which would give fetal victims of assaults on pregnant women the same legal status as their mothers; and reform of the state's drug-sentencing laws.

The state's multibillion dollar budget shortfall this year and a projected one for next year are also worrisome to Catholic Charities leaders, whose agencies contract with the state to perform a wide variety of social services, several delegates said.

"I think every advocacy organization knows that this is a really tough year to be coming in and asking for things," said Dennis Poust, NYSCC spokesman. "When times are hard, the needs of the poor are greater, and we can't retreat from our commitment to them."

Poust said this year's forum was less tense than last year's when the church battled unsuccessfully to stop a state mandate requiring employers to provide insurance coverage for contraceptives and abortifacients. The church is currently suing the state over the mandate, which exempted such church institutions as parishes from providing contraceptive/abortifacient coverage but is being enforced against Catholic

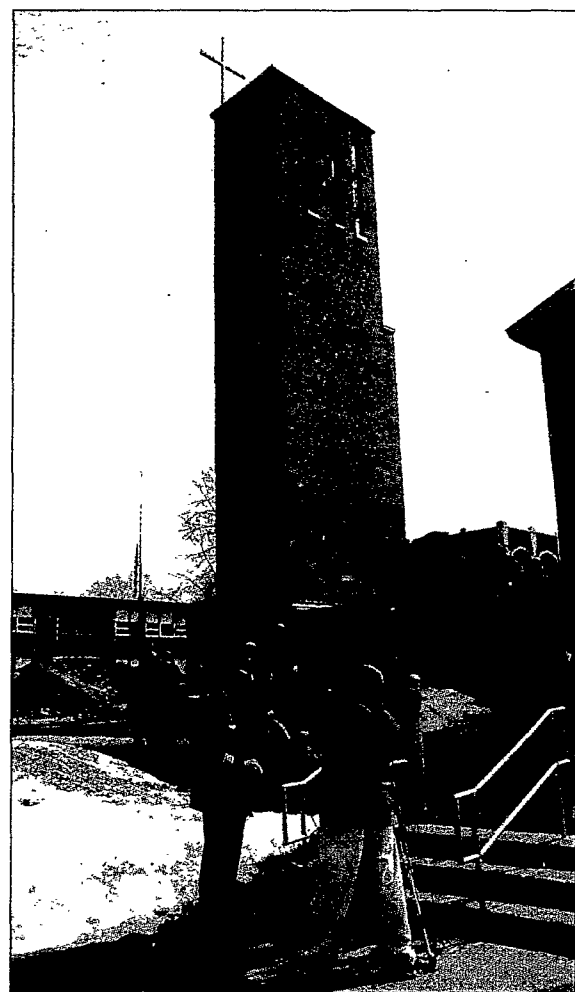
hospitals and agencies, he said.

Although the church representatives went to Albany to lobby about a number of issues this year, the Catholic conference indicated that mandates at odds with church teaching remained a concern. Among these are a proposed bill that passed the Assembly Feb. 10 that would force all hospitals to offer "emergency contraception" to rape victims even if there is evidence of conception and the drugs would kill the victims' unborn children. Another bill pending in the Assembly would require all commercial health plans to provide coverage for abortion. Still another proposed bill would require all Medicaid managed-care plans — including Fidelis, the statewide Catholic-sponsored plan — to provide coverage of reproductive procedures antithetical to church teaching.

"The conference opposes these threats to religious freedom and to the ability of religious-affiliated health providers to carry out their mission consistent with their religious beliefs," a conference statement read.

Among diocesan representatives attending the forum was a delegation from Catholic Charities of Tompkins and Tioga counties. Led by George P. Ferrari Jr., the delegation's members met with Sandi Carroll, legislative aide to Barbara S. Lifton, a Democratic assemblywoman from Tompkins and Cortland counties.

The Catholic Charities delegates noted that state funding cuts are hurting the agency's efforts to move welfare recipients into employment — efforts that have helped more than 200 people get off welfare since January 2000, Ferrari said. The delegates also pressed Carroll for a streamlined enrollment process in the state's health-insurance pro-



Dan Xeller

Ex-mayor mourned

A television crew interviews Rochester Police Chief Robert Duffy outside St. Ambrose Church March 17 following the funeral of former Rochester Mayor Thomas P. Ryan Jr. Mr. Ryan, who served as the city's mayor for 20 years, died March 14 after a battle with cancer. He was 73.

grams, Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus.

Ferrari also joined a group of Southern Tier delegates who visited with an aide in the office of Sen. John R. Kuhl Jr., a Republican whose district comprises Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben and Yates counties, as well as part of Ontario and Tompkins counties. The delegates included Elizabeth Berliner, principal of Holy Family Junior High School in Elmira, and two of her students, eighth-graders Dan McCahill and Jon Anthony.

Among other things, Berliner lobbied for tuition tax credits for Catholic school parents. On that note, Jon said that the government can only benefit from helping nonpublic school parents who save the state money by sending their offspring to nonpublic schools.

"They're still paying taxes for public schools even when they're not sending their kids to public schools," Jon said.

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