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Turning Catholic Values Into Political Action

The Maryland Catholic Conference 25th Annual Lobby Night

A Recap & Call to Action

ANNAPOLIS, MD (Feb. 16, 2009) – Answering the call to turn Catholic values into political action, 10 St. Martin's parishioners, led by their pastor, Msgr. Mark Brennan, visited state lawmakers to advocate positions critical to human dignity and life, including marriage, the death penalty, poverty, immigration, and stem-cell research.

The Maryland Catholic Conference's 25th Annual Lobby Night drew 600 parishioners from the archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington, and the diocese of Wilmington. The MCC is the public policy arm of the Maryland Catholic bishops.

After a welcome by Fr. John Kingsbury, pastor of hosting parish St. Mary's, and prayers and remarks by various dignitaries, including Bishop Martin D. Holley of the Washington Archdiocese, the group was briefed by MCC executives.

Addressing key issues were Mary Ellen Russell, executive director; Julie M. Varner, associate director of Social Concerns; Nancy E. Paltell, associate director of Respect for Life; Ellen Robertson, associate director, Education & Family Life; and Mary Sullivan, communications director.

MCC executives stressed that Catholic advocacy works and cited two recent successes:

- The failure of a planned bill aimed at closing down Maryland's 40 pregnancy resource centers, which serve 30,000 women each year; and,
- The failure, in committee, of Senate Bill 238, which would have extended the statute of limitations on child abuse cases, making it easier for trial lawyers in civil litigation to sue the Church, despite many protections already in place to protect children. In California, similar legislation prompted claims of nearly \$2 billion against the church; six dioceses have filed for bankruptcy. (This bill is still a threat in the Maryland House, as H.B. 556.)

*"Lobby Night is a great way to be heard on issues that matter. But it doesn't stop there. We must make bring gospel values to the public square by taking action so that as Catholics, we're **always** heard."*

— **Msgr. Mark Brennan, pastor, St. Martin's**

After reciting the Litany of St. Thomas More, martyr and patron saint of statesmen, politicians and lawyers, all 600 participants dispersed to state Senate and House office buildings to visit their legislators, meeting up afterward at a reception with senators, delegates, and bishops.

St. Martin's parishioners broke into two groups: Msgr. Brennan; Rich McKay, district captain; Luis Gorres; Therese Rodriguez; Joe Schuler; Erin Johnson, youth ministry director; high school students David Harper, Patrick Prendergast, Maria Rodriguez, and Ellen Stoolmiller visited with Sen. Jennie M. Forehand and Delegates Luiz R. S. Simmons, James W. Gilchrist, and House majority leader Kumar P. Barve, all of the 17th Legislative District. Jorge Collazo joined St. John Neumann parishioners, visiting 39th District legislators Sen. Nancy J. King and Delegates Saqib Ali, Charles E. Barkley, and Kirill Reznik.

The 17th District group spent nearly an hour with their legislators. "We got them thinking and responding to what we presented," said Rich McKay. "And we continued our discussion at the reception afterward with Delegate Gilchrist, mentioning that we represent a parish of 8,000 people."

(over)

Discussion included the following issues:

Marriage †

Patrick Prendergast and Ellen Stoolmiller asked legislators to vote only for laws conforming with the fact that marriage is between a man and a woman, the most natural way for children to be brought into and raised in the world. Msgr. Brennan noted that our country's founders respected the opinions of mankind. On same-sex unions, do we show the same respect for mankind in India, Africa, and China, or are we just looking at western European and Canadian cultures? Is this cultural imperialism, a subtle form of racism? he asked. He noted that marriage holds a privileged historical position because it performs a societal function, keeping most men and women in stable unions, and provides the best way to raise kids—studies prove this. Del. Barve and Del. Simmons said they support civil unions. Del. Gilchrist said he supported Del. Simmon's proposed legislation for civil unions because it doesn't require churches to marry same-sex couples. Sen. Forehand said she supported civil unions. Del. Simmons promised to strike a compromise between redefining marriage and how the law stands. Msgr. Brennan noted evidence from the majority of states, including California, shows most people support the traditional definition, as also defined by natural law. The Church doesn't oppose granting certain benefits to unmarried couples, such as medical decision-making rights. [For more info, see www.mdcathcon.org/marriage]

Death Penalty †

In answer to Del. Barve's question about whether the church wanted to eliminate the death penalty even if the guilt of the accused was solidly established, or even if the case involved a heinous crime, Rich McKay said, yes, the church values every human life, and each person's capacity to seek forgiveness and receive the mercy of God. Sen. Forehand said she was against the death penalty. Joe Schuler noted that the Church believed the sentence of life without the possibility of parole, available in Maryland, is a just and sufficient means of protecting citizens. [For more info, see www.mdcathcon.org/deathpenalty]

Immigration †

Drivers licenses shouldn't be used for immigration purposes, the group told their lawmakers, and Sen. Forehand agreed, reminding them she has led the charge against Real ID, pushing Maryland to fight federal driver's license and identification standards taking effect next year. She has said a national database invites identity theft and invasion of privacy, and imposes inconveniences and higher taxes with no real benefits. Del. Barve said he's sympathetic to immigrant issues, but that the state must follow federal mandates. [For more info, see www.mdcathcon.org/Immigration]

Stem-Cell Research †

Therese Rodriguez asked the lawmakers to vote only for effective stem-cell research. Research involving adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood are effective, and using that research, doctors have found cures for 70 diseases, compared to zero cures with embryonic stem cells. Adult stem-cell research also is more cost effective. Maryland has proposed \$18.4 million, an increase of \$400,000 this year alone, to fund stem cell research—half using embryonic stem cells, a method which kills a human embryo—and half for adult and umbilical cord blood stem-cell research. The Church advocates for ethical and *effective* stem-cell research; all signs point to adult stem-cell research as most effective. Legislators had little to say on this topic, but at the reception afterward, Del. Gilchrist said he'd research the issue, as it appeared too much funding was going toward something without an immediate effect on people and the economy. [For more info, see www.mdcathcon.org/stemcellresearch]

Jorge Collazo says visits with legislators were a learning experience, and he vows to learn candidates' positions before he exercises his vote. "I learned that some don't know the details of the issues," he said. "It does make a difference when we shine light on the issues for them. I understand that they go with the flow of what people want. If we contact them and express our position in numbers, it most certainly can effect what they do."

You can bring gospel values to the public square by voicing your opinion in Maryland's political process, first visiting www.mdcathcon.org. The MCC's treasure trove of resources can direct you to people deciding future legislation on critical issues—critical to you, your family, and your community. †