Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There are many who find politics uncomfortable, but being engaged, responsible citizens is part of our obligation both as citizens and as Catholics. The world needs people who help to shape our communities, not for any partisan bias, but because they heed our Savior's call to compassion and respect for the dignity of all people.

This year our Diocesan Public Policy Committee draws our attention to four deeply concerning issues:

• The exclusion of farmworkers from the basic labor rights that the rest of us take for granted;
• The U.S. Bishops' recently issued pastoral letter on racism;
• The continuing tragedy of the opioid epidemic; and
• The movement to pass an extreme abortion bill in New York State.

Because the abortion legislation is likely to move quickly through the legislative chambers in January, I draw your attention to it now and ask that you prepare to respond quickly when asked in early January.

According to the New York State Catholic Conference, the Executive Branch leadership and the majority leadership in the New York State Legislature have promised to enact the “Reproductive Health Act” early in 2019. What is not stated is that this bill goes much farther than just to “codify” Roe v. Wade in New York State. The Reproductive Health Act (RHA) would make abortion less safe and more expansive than it is now. Sadly, the abortion rate in New York State is already more than twice the national average. This would have detrimental consequences for pregnant women and their unborn children, allowing non-doctors to perform abortions and permitting abortions for any reason in the third trimester of pregnancy right up to a mother’s due date. It would remove all criminal penalties for abortion, including acting against the mother’s will as in the intentional targeting of an unborn child in an act of domestic violence. It would remove our state’s protections for infants accidentally born alive in the course of an abortion. It is our duty as believers in Jesus to support life and the courageous women who seek our pastoral assistance as they deal with complex life issues.

When life is threatened in any way, whether by abortion, racism, drug addiction or poverty, Catholics are called to speak up and stand with those who are being oppressed. Please support the work of our Public Policy Committee.

Rejoicing in God's gift of life and His creation, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Salvatore R. Matano
Bishop of Rochester
RESPONDING TO THE OPIOID CRISIS

The Opioid epidemic continues to ravage the lives of individuals and families. In 2017, 197 Americans died every day from an Opioid overdose. Drug overdose deaths have become the leading cause of death for those under the age of 50. The Diocesan Public Policy Committee believes that as caring and compassionate Catholic communities, we are called to respond to this continuing need to address this disease which is impacting our own faith community and our communities at large.

Many parishes offered educational and support programs in 2018. We encourage more parishes to engage in these efforts. Here are some ways parishes might address this continuing epidemic:

• Develop understanding of the disease of addiction, creating compassion and support for those impacted individuals and families.
• Obtain training in the use of Narcan, the overdose reversal drug.
• Support recovery programs and collaborate with local agencies that are addressing this crisis.
• Provide addiction-prevention programs for youth.
• Consider how existing parish ministries could support this continuing epidemic.

Many parishes have been called to respond during 2019. We encourage more parishes to engage in these efforts. Here are some ways parishes might address the opioid epidemic:

• Consider how existing parish ministries could support this continuing epidemic.
• Provide addiction-prevention programs for youth.
• Consider how existing parish ministries could support this continuing epidemic.

For over 125 years ago, beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum and throughout the 20th century, the Catholic Church has taught that workers have the right to decent pay and working conditions befitting their human dignity, and the right to organize to ensure this just treatment. Here in the Diocese of Rochester, we have for years stood with a specific group of workers whose rights have not been respected, the farmworkers who harvest crops and tend livestock throughout our State.

For decades these workers have been excluded from basic human and legal rights, economic opportunities, and respect. They are isolated from the general community by language, geography, and prejudice. They live in poverty, performing exhausting and often dangerous labor for long hours.

These conditions are due in part to New York State labor law. New York labor law categorically denies farmworkers the basic rights and protections enjoyed by virtually all other workers. These exclusions mean that farmworkers do not have the right to a guaranteed day of rest per week, overtime pay, disability insurance, or protections while bargaining collectively.

This year, our Diocesan Public Policy Committee is asking the faithful to speak up for farmworkers by petitioning their state elected officials to support the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act. This bill would end the exclusion of farmworkers from these basic rights and simply grant them equal treatment under our labor laws.

You will have the opportunity to add your signature and your voice to this effort during Public Policy Weekend, February 9-10.

RESOURCES FOR PRAYER, FAITH FORMATION, AND DIALOGUE

Resources for prayer, faith formation, and dialogue will be available during 2019.

THE ABORTION EXPANSION ACT: LIVES IN THE BALANCE

The Executive Branch leadership and the majority leadership in the New York State Legislature have promised to enact the “Reproductive Health Act” early in 2019. Currently, abortion is legal in New York State for any reason up to 24 weeks of pregnancy, and any time after that if the mother’s life is at risk. So under the age of 50. The Diocesan Public Policy Committee believes that as caring and compassionate Catholic communities, we are called to respond to this continuing need to address this disease which is impacting our own faith community and our communities at large.

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The Public Policy Committee continues to follow and support other important justice issues including the Education Tax Credit, war and non-violence, federal immigration reform, child care subsidies for low-income working families, and access to mental health care.