

Keep Your Hand on the Plow: Fulfilling a Moral Obligation

Review of advocacy efforts in 2014 legislative sessions

Our U.S. Catholic Bishops have taught us that “**participation in political life is a moral obligation**”, but they never said it’d be easy. Catholics from the Rochester Diocese advocated with elected officials on many issues during the 2014 spring legislative session. Below is a summary of some of the results. Some of these efforts turned out the way we wanted, and some didn’t. We did not, and will not, give up. We keep our hands on the plow and remain faithful to the call to work for the Common Good.

Immigration Reform:

For many years the Catholic Church in the U.S. has stood in solidarity with immigrants and their families in calling for immigration reform. The current humanitarian crisis on the southern border involving thousands of unaccompanied minors puts a human face on why reform is so badly needed. While the U.S. Senate passed reform legislation last year, the House of Representatives refused to take up the bill this session. This failure to act will cause continued suffering, family separation, exploitation and fear in the lives of our immigrant sisters and brothers. We have to continue holding elected officials accountable while recognizing our own obligation to work more diligently on this issue in coming years.



Child detainees sleep in a holding cell at a US Customs and Border Protection processing facility in Brownsville, Texas

Unborn Children and Women:

The **Women’s Equality Act** is a 10 point proposal in the NY State legislature that includes protections for victims of sexual harassment, domestic violence and human trafficking along with provisions to insure pay equity for women. Sadly it also includes measures that could allow abortions through the ninth month of pregnancy and allow abortions to be performed by people who are not physicians. In 2014, the bill was passed by the Assembly but the State Senate did not bring the 10-point proposal to the floor for a vote. Instead the Senate passed the nine other points of the WEA separately. The Assembly leadership refused to split up the bill so the WEA was not enacted. This is a victory for unborn children! At the same time, it’s tragic that laws to protect women from terrible human rights abuses were not passed. The NYS Catholic Conference and our Diocesan Public Policy Committee will keep working on this issue, as it will almost certainly be a major focus of our efforts in 2015.

Strengthening Families:

This past February, parishes across the Rochester diocese took part in Public Policy Weekend, gathering **9,679 signatures** on petitions urging New York State officials to designate \$3 million for the Maternity and Early Childhood Foundation and to increase funding for the Healthy Families NY by \$3.5 million in the 2014-2015 state budget. These two programs serve low income, young and vulnerable parents, mentoring them, encouraging them to finish school, supporting them to have healthy pregnancies and births, and teaching them how to raise safe, healthy children. In the final version of the state budget, Healthy Families’ allocation was kept at the same level, and MECF received \$600,000. Neither program received the support it deserved, but MECF’s funding was in real danger of being eliminated *entirely* from the state budget, so we believe that our advocacy helped to keep this program going.

Child Care:

In more positive news, this year's state budget includes an additional \$41 million in child care subsidies, which is slated to create more than 4,500 new child care slots. Increasing child care subsidies was our diocesan advocacy issue in 2013. We are glad that the state government has finally begun to take more seriously the vitally important need of working families to have access to safe and affordable child care.

Farmworkers:

The tens of thousands of farmworkers who harvest crops and tend farm animals in New York each year are still waiting for equal labor rights; although passed by the Assembly, the State Senate did not vote on the **Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act**, which would have granted farmworkers the right to overtime pay, a guaranteed day of rest per week and collective bargaining protections. We will continue to raise our voices against this injustice with our state government officials.

“Join with thousands of others to work for justice in society and promote the values important to our faith. Through the New York State Catholic Conference's **Catholic Action Network**, you can stay informed about important issues and strengthen the Catholic voice.”

Sign up at <http://www.nyscatholic.org/nys-catholic-conference-action-center/?vvsrc=%2fRegister>

Let the Children Come to Me...

and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

Matthew 19:14

“In this humanitarian crisis, let us not forget that immigrant families and children are human beings.

They are children of God and must be treated with dignity and respect, care and compassion.

-Catholic Charities USA

Urge Congress to protect Vulnerable Migrant Children

Call 1-866-940-2439 to be connected with the offices of your Representative and both of your Senators.

Here's a sample script: "I'm from *State, Congregation/ Community* and as a person of faith, **I strongly oppose any rollbacks to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act**. Unaccompanied children fleeing violence should not be returned to unsafe situations, but must be protected and cared for humanely.

As your constituent, I expect you to stand firm against any proposal that would sacrifice a child's safety for expediency. The U.S. must instead find ways to reduce the violence these children face in their home countries and ensure that children who arrive to the U.S. have access to the legal counsel and services they need.”

You can also send an e-mail via Catholics Confront Global Poverty:

<http://www.confrontglobalpoverty.org/get-involved/action-center/>

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