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Bishops reject, some legislators defend parish bill

by Chaz Muth by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON

Two Catholic Connecticut state legislators are overseeing a bill that would give the laypeople of Catholic churches financial control of their parishes, legislation the state's Catholic bishops have strongly urged their parishioners to fight.

The bill was introduced March 5 in the Connecticut Legislature's Judiciary Committee -- co-chaired by Sen. Andrew J. McDonald of Stamford and Rep. Michael Lawlor of East Haven, who are both Democrats.

The legislation was proposed by a group of Catholics concerned about the management of parish funds, following the embezzlement conviction of a Connecticut priest, said Lawrence B. Cook, a spokesman for Connecticut Senate Democrats.

Calling the legislation a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Archbishop Henry J. Mansell of Hartford, Conn., condemned the proposed law in a statement read in parishes in the archdiocese March 7 and 8, and called on parishioners to voice their opposition to it at a March 11 Judiciary Committee public hearing.

The bill would replace an existing law that defines Catholic churches and congregations as nonprofit corporations operated by a five-member board of three clergy and two laypeople. Instead, the board would be made up of seven to 13 laypeople elected by parishioners. The pastor would not be a member of the board and the bishop would serve as an ex officio nonvoting member.

"This is contrary to the apostolic nature of the Catholic Church because it disconnects parishes from their pastors and bishop," Archbishop Mansell said. "Parishes would be run by boards from which pastors and the archbishop would be effectively excluded."

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., also delivered a harsh rebuke in a statement read at Masses in his diocese. He echoed Archbishop Mansell's words, and added, "This bill, moreover, is a thinly-veiled attempt to silence the Catholic Church on the important issues of the day, such as same-sex marriage."

Cook told Catholic News Service March 9 the legislation was introduced on behalf of a group of Catholics whose only interest was to have better oversight of how the money from parishioners going into the collection plate was being spent.

Father Michael Jude Fay, former pastor of St. John Church in Darien, Conn., was convicted in 2007 of stealing up to \$1.4 million in parishioner donations and is currently serving a three-year prison term.

In another case, a priest in Greenwich, Conn., resigned as pastor of his parish in 2007 following a preliminary audit of the church's financial records that revealed \$500,000 in unaccounted-for spending.

Lawlor told the Connecticut Post the bill would revise a 1955 religious corporation act by requiring churches to open up financial records, if the parish set up its own board of directors, and would give laypeople the power to establish and approve church budgets, and manage all financial affairs.

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The bill states the bishop and priests would continue to control "matters pertaining exclusively to religious tenets and practices."

"The state has no right to interfere in the internal affairs and structure of the Catholic Church," Bishop Lori said in his statement. "This bill is directed only at the Catholic Church, but could someday be forced on other denominations. The state has no business controlling religion."

Attorney Philip Lacovara, who attends St. Aloysius Church in New Canaan, Conn., maintains the bill isn't constitutional, and in a March 8 letter to the Judiciary Committee he urged lawmakers to reject the legislation.

However, Paul Lakeland, chair of the Catholic studies department at Jesuit-run Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn., told the Connecticut Post this bill doesn't interfere with the free exercise of religion, because the legislation preserves the bishop's control over doctrinal matters.

News of the bill provoked strong emotions from proponents and opponents, according to published reports.

It also prompted Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, to call for the Connecticut Legislature to remove McDonald and Lawlor from public office.

"Lawlor and McDonald have demonstrated that they are ethically unfit to continue as lawmakers," Donohue said. "They have evinced a bias so strong, and so malicious, that it compromises their ability to serve the public good."

He claimed the two state lawmakers used their position to strike back at the Catholic Church, because they are champions of same-sex marriage and church leaders have repeatedly voiced their opposition to laws that would permit such unions.

"We reject this irrational, unlawful and bigoted bill that jeopardizes the religious liberty of our church," Bishop Lori said.

In a joint statement released March 9, McDonald and Lawlor rejected the notion they had originated the legislation, or that they want to launch an attack on the Catholic Church and freedom of religion.

"In reality, this bill was proposed and written by a group of faithful Catholic parishioners from Fairfield County who asked the Judiciary Committee to consider giving the subject a public hearing," the statement said.

"Especially considering the fact that one of the large-scale embezzlements which gave rise to this proposal originated from a parish corporation in Darien, a town that Sen. McDonald represents," it continued, "we decided to give these parishioners a chance to present to the Judiciary Committee a case for their proposed revisions to existing corporate law."

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