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Hearing on Connecticut parish bill postponed

Tom Roberts NCR Staff | Mar. 11, 2009

Connecticut Capitol building

A scheduled public hearing on legislation that would restructure the way Catholic parishes are organized in Connecticut was abruptly postponed March 10, and the bill was pulled until the constitutionality of the proposal as well as earlier state laws that name specific religious denominations can be reviewed.

The most recent legislation provoked strong opposition from church officials and parishioners, who charge that the measure is unconstitutional and, according to Bridgeport Bishop William Lori, "a thinly-veiled attempt to silence the Catholic church on the important issues of the day, such as same-sex marriage."

The hearing on the bill, which would amend the state?s "Religious Corporation Act," was originally scheduled for March 11 by the legislature?s Judiciary Committee. The measure is needed, say the bill?s proponents, to prevent the high-profile embezzlements and mismanagement that have plagued Connecticut parishes in recent years.

The day before the hearing, following what *The Hartford Courant* described as ?the biggest political firestorm of the 2009 legislative session,? Rep. Michael P. Lawlor and Sen. Andrew McDonald, both Democrats and co-chairs of the legislature?s judiciary committee, issued a statement noting that ?For reasons that are unclear,? the state has long had ?laws on the books singling out particular religions and treating them differently from other religions in our statutes. That doesn?t seem right.

In fact, many of our existing corporate laws dealing with religious groups appear to us to be unconstitutional under the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.? Any changes to existing law, such as the one proposed ?would likely also be unconstitutional,? said the legislators.
From pulpits throughout the state, mass-goers at Sunday services were urged to contact state lawmakers in opposition to the bill.

In his statement, Lori said bus transportation to the state capitol would be provided to parishioners who want to make their opposition to the bill known at the hearing.

"It is time for us to defend our church!" said the Lori statement.
According to news reports, lawmakers were flooded with calls objecting to the new bill. At the request of

proponents of the measure in the legislature, the bill was pulled for the duration of this legislative session, according to Lawlor and McDonald.

Under current state law, Connecticut Catholic churches are governed by a parish corporation whose officers include the bishop, the diocesan vicar general, the parish pastor and two lay trustees. The legislation would expand parish boards to include between 7-13 members "elected from among the lay members of the congregation" with the bishop serving as a non-voting ex-officio member.

The bill deals with administrative matters of a parish and does not limit a "bishop or pastor in matters pertaining exclusively to religious tenants and practices," according to the text.

Among those spearheading the revisions to parish governance is Thomas Gallagher, a Bridgeport Diocese Catholic and contributor to NCR. "We as Catholics can do better as co-fiduciaries of our parishes," said Gallagher. "This is a pro-priest proposal because it spreads the legal responsibility for a parish to lay members rather than putting it largely on the shoulders of the pastor and also the bishop."

In a March 2007 NCR column, Gallagher spelled-out the rationale for a new approach to parish governance. "A governance structure is needed that protects the bishops, pastors and priests from overreaching laity, while the laity need a structure that makes room for real participation and protection from overreaching bishops, pastors and priests," wrote Gallagher.

Still, said Gallagher, the legislation under consideration goes too far by limiting the voting rights of the bishop and pastor in their roles as members of the parish corporation. "Catholic parishes need to be connected more closely to their bishops and pastors ? it?s part of who we are as a church," he said.

But the church hierarchy?s problems with the bill appear to run much deeper.
"We reject this irrational, unlawful, and bigoted bill that jeopardizes the religious liberty of the church," wrote Lori.

Lori received support from Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, Col., who is frequently outspoken on public issues. He issued a statement saying, ?What happens in Connecticut matters here. ? While those outside the church often view it as a ?monolith,? Chaput said, the truth is that the church?s ?real structure is much closer to a confederation of families.?

He called the proposed Connecticut bill ?imprudent, unjust, dismissive of First Amendment concerns and contemptuous? of the rights of Catholics. ?If Catholics want Caesar telling them how they?re allowed to live their civil life as a community, this is exactly the kind of legislation to make it happen.?

Roberts is NCR Editor-at-Large.

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