Speakers at the ninth biennial Catholics at the Capitol legislative conference urged Catholics to put their faith into action in the public arena. Close to 200 Catholics from around the state attended the conference, Wednesday, April 8, which began with sessions at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center and concluded with participants having the opportunity to visit the offices of their state legislators.

The theme of the day was “A Church United in Hope and Love.” Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison presided at an opening prayer service, with lectors Jean Kelly, Milwaukee province director for the National Council of Catholic Women, and Sr. Sally Ann Brickner, OSF, from the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross, Green Bay.

In his opening remarks, Archbishop Jerome E. Listecki of Milwaukee said, “We are certainly a blessed people. We have our faith. We care for our brothers and sisters from birth to natural death,” he said. “It is a necessity to take our Catholic faith and put it into action. We are blessed to have a participatory democracy. We have to exercise our rights in order to preserve them.”

In a spirit of bipartisanship, two Wisconsin legislators who are Catholic welcomed those attending the conference. Introducing them was John Huebscher, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of the state’s Catholic bishops. Huebscher said, “It’s important to open the day in this way. ... It’s important to articulate our message, to reach out to everyone. We are bound together to serve the common good.”

Speaking first was Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau). He encouraged those attending the conference to visit the Capitol later in the day, noting that it is an “interesting” time in the Legislature. “We are going 100 miles an hour,” he said, referring to the budget deliberation process and a number of other bills being considered.

Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca (D-Kenosha) also spoke, saying, “It’s so valuable to have people of faith and our Catholic tradition here. You’re coming at a good time. Many policy issues are put into the budget. It’s important that you weigh in on the issues.”

The speakers mentioned such issues as long-term care, family care, help for people with disabilities, aging services, education, the University of Wisconsin system, a new arena for
Director’s Corner
John Huebscher, Executive Director

In Catholic teaching the principle of solidarity reminds us that we human beings are connected to each other. This is true when making public policy. Policy choices aren’t made in a vacuum but in the context of the community that makes them. And a policy in one area has ripple effects in others.

We were reminded of this last month when the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) released its study of poverty in Wisconsin for 2013. The study found that despite the fact job creation was up in 2013, poverty in Wisconsin actually increased. There is no one reason for this. But the collective impact of a number of existing policies and the likely impact of new ones may offer at least a partial explanation.

The minimum wage remains at $7.25 an hour despite clear evidence it has lost purchasing power. Moreover, there is little hope of raising it soon. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is another promising way to help the working poor. But recent budgets have curtailed the EITC. Looking forward, new policies such as a right to work law and repeal of a longstanding policy that government construction projects pay the prevailing wage are likely to reduce wages and the purchasing power they provide to many families.

It is frequently said a job is the best way out of poverty. But it is not the reality for many in our Wisconsin family. And the data suggests that too many of the jobs created by our current economy do not pay living wages.

The IRP report also cited the value of our “safety net” in helping the working poor cope while they search for employment that can sustain them and their families. Yet, other proposals seek to place new restrictions on certain safety net programs. (See the other article on this page.)

The IRP report suggests that these old and newer policy choices are unlikely to offer a recipe for economic recovery or advancement for many Wisconsin families. Until we make better choices, the prosperity enjoyed by past generations may continue to elude too many of our friends and neighbors.

WCC Testifies in Opposition to Drug Testing and FoodShare Bills

On April 30, the WCC joined other religious advocates in opposing two proposals that would mandate drug tests for some public assistance programs. Assembly Bill 191 and Assembly Bill 192, both authored by Rep. Mike Rohrkaste (R-Neenah), are identical to those offered in the budget proposal (Assembly Bill 21/Senate Bill 21), and religious advocates presented their April 16 interfaith letter to the Assembly Committee on Public Benefits Reform.

“We do so because of our shared commitment to respect, compassion, and fairness for all persons,” the groups say. “In our respective religious traditions poverty and joblessness are not indicators of bad character.”

The letter concludes, “We agree that policies should help the needy without enabling dependency of those able to support themselves. But we should also avoid policies that require us to abandon those among us who cannot help themselves, or who need a little more time, patience and assistance to be able to support themselves and their families.”

Both bills passed out of committee and were passed by the full Assembly on Wednesday, May 13. WCC readers are urged to contact their senators asking them to vote no. Talking points can be found in the WCC’s state budget Issue Brief available at www.wisconsincatholic.org.

At the same April 30 hearing, the WCC also testified in opposition to Assembly Bill 177 (Rep. Robert Brooks, R-Reedsburg), which limits the foods that may be purchased under FoodShare, the state’s name for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps.

“We must not make access to food more difficult,” the WCC testified. “Rather we should utilize all our ingenuity and good will toward positive changes so that everyone can lead dignified and healthy lives.”

The bill passed out of committee and was passed by the full Assembly on Wednesday, May 13. WCC readers are again urged to contact their senators, asking them to vote no.
WCC Testifies on Right to Work Legislation

The WCC testified “for information” on a proposal (Senate Bill 44) to allow workers the option of not joining a labor union when they are employed in a workplace represented by that union.

The WCC’s testimony cited the discussion of economic justice and the relationship between workers and employers contained in its 2015 Public Policy Positions document:

“The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s act of creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers, owners, and others must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and choose to join a union, to economic initiative, and to ownership and private property. These rights must be exercised in ways that advance the common good....”

“Workers have the right to choose whether to organize, join a union, and bargain collectively, and to exercise these rights without reprisal. Workers also have responsibilities – to provide a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good. Workers and employers should not only advance their own interests, but also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all.”

The testimony concluded by urging lawmakers to assess the bill in light of three questions:

- Does SB 44 benefit the common good?
- Does it provide a just balance between the interests of workers and the interests of employers?
- Does it protect the natural right of workers to assemble and form associations?

The bill passed both houses and Governor Walker signed it into law as 2015 Wisconsin Act 1.

WCC Joins Coalition Opposing Assisted Suicide

The WCC has become a member of the newly formed “Wisconsin Coalition Against Doctor-Prescribed Suicide.” This statewide coalition was formed in response to a nationwide movement that seeks to make assisted suicide legal in all 50 states. Companion bills Senate Bill 28 (Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison) and Assembly Bill 67 (Rep. Sondy Pope, D-Cross Plains) would legalize assisted suicide in Wisconsin. Though neither bill is likely to receive a public hearing this session, disability rights groups, medical organizations, faith-based groups, right-to-life groups, and family organizations have formed a coalition to speak out on the issue.

The coalition took its first action on April 22, when it delivered a statement to the Wisconsin Medical Society (WMS), objecting to any change in the WMS’s current policy of opposing assisted suicide. The coalition statement reads:

The Wisconsin Coalition Against Assisted Suicide urges the Wisconsin Medical Society to continue its strong position in opposition to the legalization of assisted suicide. The Coalition is dedicated to promoting excellent palliative care and protecting vulnerable patients from the prescription of lethal drugs. Administration of lethal drugs is bad public policy which will have a detrimental impact on the historical role of the health care provider as healer and caregiver.

The coalition was gratified that WMS members voted a few days later to retain their opposition to assisted suicide. Coalition members include:

- American Academy of Medical Ethics
- Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities
- Christian Life Resources
- Disability Rights Wisconsin
- Elizabeth Residence
- Milwaukee Guild of the Catholic Medical Association
- St. Jude Hospice
- Wisconsin Catholic Conference
- Wisconsin Family Action
- Wisconsin Guilds of the Catholic Medical Association
- Wisconsin Right to Life
- Various Individuals
For up-to-date information, join the WCC’s free e-advocacy network and get the bi-weekly Capitol Update. Visit www.wisconsincatholic.org to sign up!

CAPITOL REPORT is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC’s activities and positions on state and federal legislation.

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the City of Milwaukee, and pro-life issues, among those that should be of interest to citizens in the state.

In his keynote address, Dr. Jonathan J. Reyes emphasized the importance of combatting poverty through a “culture of encounter.” Reyes is the Executive Director of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He pointed to the Catholic notion of justice as building “right relationships” between God and each other. “Relationships matter,” he said, noting that Pope Francis often talks about reaching out to the marginalized, the isolated, the poor, and the poor in spirit.

More and more, Reyes said, we are experiencing “two Americas”: one with the middle and upper class who have access to many opportunities and the other with minimal opportunities for education and work. “These two worlds increasingly aren’t in touch with each other,” Reyes said. “We can’t even see the marginalized. They’re isolated. They have lost hope.”

Reyes said what is needed is a “culture of encounter” or encuentro in Spanish, which he defined as “a communion of persons, a deep kind of personal connection.”

In a panel discussion, five panelists shared their perspectives on what Catholics should ask of society and each other in addressing poverty. Panelists included Archbishop Listecki; Josie Montañez-Tyler and Ralph Middlecamp of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul-District Council of Madison; Mary Jacobson of Catholic Charities-Diocese of La Crosse; and Edward Lump, Wisconsin Restaurant Association. Huebscher moderated the panel.

The speakers agreed that systemic changes need to be made, but above all, members of the Church need to be present with those in poverty. “The Corporal Works of Mercy are central to living a Christian life,” said Middlecamp. “It’s not extra credit.”

“We must look at the image of God in all of us. Solidarity says we’re all connected, and what hurts one of us, hurts all of us,” said Archbishop Listecki.