

Vincentians Push Social Justice at Catholic Lobby Day

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Left to right – Peggy Stretch, Deborah Payne and Lorraine Moriarty show off their yellow Catholic Lobby Day folders in front of the California State Capitol.

The question of who will speak up on behalf of the poor and voiceless compelled five members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society to travel to Sacramento from this archdiocese to participate in Catholic Lobby Day, May 2, in Sacramento. Justice issues were foremost in their minds, including rights of farm workers, immigrants, juvenile prisoners, the unborn and poor schoolchildren. All of these constituencies are touched by legislation currently pending in Sacramento.

Lorraine Moriarty, executive director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of San Mateo County, was among the five who drove to Sacramento for the day. "The challenge is to stand up for the most vulnerable in society, to impact legislation at local and state levels on behalf of those who do not have the political clout to effect change," said Moriarty, who has been personally involved in prison and jail ministry for more than 20 years. She refused to name a single bill as the most essential from the lot outlined by the California Catholic Conference for the day. However, she was particularly adamant about AB 2101, which would permit media to interview prisoners. "At present, prisoners are

denied that right. That is why Pelican Bay and similar situations shock us. Human beings ought to have freedom of speech whether or not they are incarcerated. Their stories must be heard, and told," Moriarty said. She also pointed out the importance of AB 788, the bill which will revise juvenile court law to focus on victims, communities and offenders working together to offer a balanced approach to restorative justice.

Approximately 30 bills were summarized for participants by the California Catholic Conference as lobby day priorities. "How can we prioritize all of these bills when they are all justice issues?" Moriarty said.

"Members of the Society see first hand the needs of the poor," said lobby day attendee Deborah Payne, president of the San Francisco Archdiocesan Council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and chair of the new National Voice of the Poor Committee for SVdP. "It is important that we not only provide emergency help but that we also speak out in one voice with the Church in expressing the needs of the poor."

The National Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul recently established the Voice of the Poor to advocate for those whom the Society serves. Representatives from each of eight regions in the country met for the first time last week in St. Louis to begin the process of building a foundation for speaking as a unified body. Two members of this national committee are from the Bay Area: Steve Pehanich, executive director of SVdP in the Diocese of San Jose, and Payne.



Ned Dolejsji (California Catholic Conference) center and George Wesolek (San Francisco Archdiocese) give last minute instructions before attendees proceed with visits to their elected legislators' offices.

"Our committee believes that it is vital to uphold our Catholic values by researching, validating, documenting, advocating, and promulgating issues related to the condition of the poor," Payne said. Payne and the other members of SVdP, known as Vincentians, admit that opinions vary greatly within the SVdP community on political issues, but the common ground of love exemplified by Christ is the unifying factor, which motivated them to speak up before elected officials in Sacramento.

"When Catholics visit elected representatives it is important to tell the stories, to share the statistics, and to describe the real needs of the poor. "As members of the Society we see and work with the poor, and because of that, it is possible to put a face on the hungry child, the single parent struggling to make ends meet, the immigrant family, lonely elderly, and the prisoner," Payne said.



Assemblyman Lou Pappan (Millbrae, District 19) literally gave up his seat to Rayond Frost (Daly City). Assemblyman Pappan is standing next to Gloria Gilloghley of San Francisco.

Vincentians made more than 11,000 visits to homes of needy families and individuals last year alone in this archdiocese. Members definitely see the needy first hand. "We need to do what our patron Saint Vincent subscribed to and go beyond affective love and show effective love. Being effective involves taking steps to create positive change," Payne said. "

We are thankful that the California Catholic Conference of Bishops included us in this second annual Catholic lobby day. It gave us an opportunity to meet one-on-one with our representatives in Sacramento and to express our interests and concerns."

Payne listed the following items as important from her point of view.

"The school nutrition bill (SB2112) is of interest. It is important to provide funding to initiate school breakfast programs so that no child need go hungry while attending school."

Income tax credit earned income (AB 1854, SB 1421): "The budget surplus is estimated to exceed \$4 billion. Now is the time to consider ways, to reduce taxes in order to help alleviate financial hardships on families."

Child Abandonment - Newborns (AB1764, SB 1368). "As Catholics we recognize that every life is valued. Members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society visit families and often observe the stress that parents encounter. When a parent cannot cope, it is important that they have options. A child is not a "throw away" item but a creation of God. It is vital to provide the option, which permits parents to surrender custody in a safe environment, such as a hospital, without fear of prosecution."

AB 788 (Maldonado) Juvenile Court Law - "When children make poor choices, punishment cannot be the only response of the social order. Rather as a community we need to find ways to heal the wounds of anger, pain, frustration and hurt that if left alone only continue to fester. The solution should be to provide means for troubled children to be rehabilitated and restored to the community. "

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