

At 30, Lobby Night draws legislative veterans, greenhorns



Deacon George Sisson discusses policy issues of concern to Catholics with Senator David Brinkley, Senator Ronald Young, Delegate Kathryn Afzali, Delegate Patrick Hogan and Delegate Kelly Schulz during the Maryland Catholic Conference's annual Lobby Night in Annapolis Feb. 17. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

ANNAPOLIS - Deacon George Sisson jumped from issue to issue, trying to squeeze a stuffed folder's worth of information into the short time he had his lawmakers' attention.

He made a case for raising the state's minimum wage and mandating paid sick leave, efforts to build immigrants' trust of law enforcement, and banning abortions after a fetus can feel pain.

In between each issue, he'd pin down the legislators' positions.

"I'd like to know how you'd vote on these," he said.

A permanent deacon at Holy Family in Middletown, Deacon Sisson, 67, was the clear leader of the four-person, Frederick County contingency at the annual Catholic Lobby Night, held Feb. 17 by the Maryland Catholic Conference. He spoke with confidence and ease; he and his wife, Dinah, are Lobby Night veterans with more than a decade of experience.

The five Frederick County lawmakers attending the meeting responded to the queries, stating support for some measures and, on others, explaining their opposing views.

Near the end of the conversation, Republican Del. Kathryn L. Afzali, a Methodist, praised Catholics for the church's consistency in "standing for those without a voice."

It was a message Deacon Sisson hoped to get across.

"We speak to Gospel values. We speak to what the church is teaching," he said on the way to the Maryland General Assembly's office buildings. He wore a wooden cross around his neck; another cross was pinned to the lapel of his gray sport coat.

Three decades

This year marked Lobby Night's 30th anniversary. The afternoon and evening event drew more than 325 people from the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, Del. It included prayer and issue briefings at St. John Neumann Church before meetings with lawmakers.

Attending were Archbishop William E. Lori, Bishop Denis J. Madden and Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski from Baltimore; Bishop Barry C. Knestout and Bishop Martin D. Holly from Washington, D.C.; and Bishop W. Francis Malooly from Wilmington.

Under the direction of executive director Mary Ellen Russell, the MCC advocates for public policy on behalf of the state's bishops.

To view a slideshow from the event, navigate the arrows below.

The event's milestone anniversary occasioned Archbishop Lori's reflection on MCC's legislative successes, including last year's death penalty repeal, the passage of the DREAM Act and the securing of state funding for nonpublic school textbooks.

He cited the state's permissive abortion laws and income inequality as challenges to be faced.

Legislative achievement, however, isn't the sole reason for Lobby Night, he said.

"The real victory has already been won through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ," Archbishop Lori said. "We don't really need to worry about whether we are making a difference. We simply need to believe that the beauty and truth of the Gospel are sufficient to change the world, as long as we don't keep it hidden."

He added: "Our Catholic faith does not fit easily into the typical categories of the world of politics. We are Catholic before we are liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican."

To commemorate three decades of advocacy, MCC staff presented certificates to longtime participants. Deacon Sisson and Dinah posed for a photo with 21 others who had attended for a decade or more. A few had been to more than 20 Lobby Nights.

'Their voice can be heard'

This year's event attracted newcomers, too. St. Louis, Clarksville, parishioner and Lobby Night novice Mary Theresa Suhar, 46, brought her 10-year-old son, Zachariah, and 7-year-old daughter, Anja, to St. John Neumann. As they prepared to meet with lawmakers, Suhar said she hoped the experience taught her children about democracy.

"The main thing is that (they understand) they are part of the government," she said. "Their voice can be heard, so they should be informed about what's going on and not be afraid to say what they believe, to tell our representatives what to do."

Visiting with legislators was less intimidating than he expected, said rookie Evan Ponton, a seminarian spending a pastoral year at St. Michael the Archangel, Overlea.

He accompanied St. Michael's pastor, Father James L. Sorra, and three other parishioners. Speaking with State Sen. Katherine A. Klausmeier (D-Baltimore County), Ponton advocated for a cap for nonprofits hit hard in some jurisdictions by the state's new stormwater remediation fees, also known as the "rain tax."

"That's money for us that's going to the poor, helping homeless," he said of the funds some parishes fear may be diverted to paying the new fee.

While Catholics were delving into issues at St. John Neumann, Gov. Martin J. O'Malley was testifying in support of a minimum wage increase before Senate and House committees. The bishops also support an increase, as does Dinah Sisson, 69, who volunteers at a Frederick County food bank.

"Most everybody who comes in there has a job," she said, "but it's either feed their families or pay the rent."

Despite their engagement, the Sissons are frustrated by the polarized party politics ubiquitous in the Maryland State House and the U.S. Capitol, they said. However, it doesn't stop them from making the 90-minute trip to Annapolis year after year.

"I come because I get to see exactly how each person I vote for - or don't vote for - feels," Dinah said.

That directly affects her next vote, she added.

When it comes to legislation, the Sissons take the long view.

"Even if they say, 'I'll take it into consideration,' I consider that a victory," Dinah said.

Later she quipped about their slow-and-steady approach: "The turtle wins the race."

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