

Bill giving laity control of parish finances killed in Connecticut

HARTFORD, Conn. – At the request of its proponents, a bill that would have given laypeople financial control of their parishes in Connecticut has been withdrawn and is dead for this legislative session.

In a joint statement March 10, the co-chairmen of the Connecticut Legislature's Judiciary Committee, Sen. Andrew J. McDonald of Stamford and Rep. Michael Lawlor of East Haven, announced the cancellation of a scheduled March 11 hearing on the controversial bill.

There was no immediate comment on the bill's demise from the Catholic bishops of Connecticut, who had strongly opposed the legislation and urged Catholics to turn out at the hearing in large numbers.

"At the request of the proponents who are advocating this legislation, we have decided to cancel the public hearing for tomorrow, table any further consideration of this bill for the duration of this session, and ask the attorney general his opinion regarding the constitutionality of the existing law," said McDonald and Lawlor, both Democrats and Catholics.

"It would serve no useful purpose to have a conversation about changing the laws that govern existing Roman Catholic corporations until we know if any of these existing laws are constitutional," they said.

The legislation, introduced March 5, 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 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 the planned hearing.

The bill would have replaced 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 measure called for boards to be made up of seven to 13 laypeople elected by parishioners. It said 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 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 that 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, 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 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 have revised 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 have given laypeople the power to establish and approve church budgets, and manage all financial affairs.

Under the measure, the bishop and priests would have continued 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, maintained the bill was not constitutional, and in a March 8 letter to the Judiciary Committee had urged lawmakers to reject the legislation.

However, Paul Lakeland, who chairs the Catholic studies department at Jesuit-run Fairfield University in Fairfield, told the Connecticut Post the bill did not interfere with the free exercise of religion, because the legislation preserved the bishop’s control over doctrinal matters.

McDonald and Lawlor said in their March 10 statement that it “doesn’t seem right” that existing Connecticut laws treat some religious groups differently from others and “appear to us to be unconstitutional” under the First Amendment.

“If that is correct, any changes to that law would likely also be unconstitutional,” they said.

They said they would invite “representatives from all religious denominations around the state together with legal scholars on this topic to participate in a forum regarding the current law.”

“Such a conversation would be more appropriate to have when the Legislature is not in session and other more important issues, such as the current fiscal crisis, are resolved,” they added. “We intend to do that once we have the benefit of the attorney general’s opinion.”