

Church voice in state public policy necessary

FAIRFAX, Calif. – While the Catholic Church in California “does not seek to impose our values on anyone,” it is nonetheless called “to be a strong moral voice on what we believe is necessary for the well-being of society and the good of the human family,” the president of the California Conference of Catholic Bishops told an audience at St. Rita Parish in Fairfax March 27.

The vast impact that the church and Catholics have on the state makes it all the more critical they have a voice in California public policies, Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton said, pointing out that:

- The Catholic Church is the largest provider of health care, social services and private education in California, operating 41 hospitals, 31 health care centers, 13 colleges and universities, 115 high schools, 586 elementary schools and 181 social service units.
- Catholics make up 30 percent of the state population, approximately 11 million – of whom nearly half are Latino.

The last of six speakers in a Lenten lecture series at St. Rita based on the 1967 encyclical “*Populorum Progressio*,” Bishop Blaire focused his address on the work of the California Catholic Conference which, he said, “resonates with the teachings” of Pope Paul VI’s well-known document.

The conference is the state Catholic bishops’ lobbying arm, based in Sacramento.

“Listen to the opening words of the encyclical,” Bishop Blaire said, then quoted them: “The development of peoples has the church’s close attention, particularly the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those ... looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities.”

The encyclical’s exhortation, he said, has clear local application where “the great

material needs of our people in California are still food, health, education, housing and employment.”

The bishop told the gathering of about 100 people that “Populorum Progressio” “is not talking about just acquisition of possessions but rather of an integrated fulfillment, a development from less human conditions to more human conditions.”

That goal, he said, underpins the California Catholic Conference’s priority-setting as it evaluates “the flood of bills before the Legislature each year.”

Bishops in the state “as pastors” meet with the conference staff “as experts” twice a year to “discern prudential ways to bring the Gospel to bear on legislative, judicial or executive matters,” Bishop Blaire said.

“We are careful to select only those issues which have a significant moral component or affect the life of the church and her ability to freely minister to our people and in the community,” he said.

High on the California Catholic Conference radar, he said, are efforts to have conscience clauses removed from reproductive health legislation which would force Catholic hospitals or individuals to take part in abortions or other procedures in opposition to church teaching.

Another issue is legislation that if passed would allow physician-assisted suicide, he said.

The California bishops have also been “very involved in reform of the prisons, a terribly broken system,” he said, as well as comprehensive immigration reform, health care for children and vocational training, especially for high school dropouts.

“The list goes on,” he said, “depending upon legislation introduced, judicial decisions rendered, ... the governor’s priorities, the state budget and cultural issues which weigh in on moral and Gospel values.”

The state’s bishops also are looking at establishing “legislative networks throughout the dioceses in the state.” While the plan is in the early stages, he added, “it will be most interesting to see what impact this will have upon governmental decision-making when there is a wider engagement of Catholic people in the work of the

conference.”

According to a recent report by Seattle-based researcher Joseph Claude Harris, Catholics represent nearly 60 percent of California’s projected population growth in the next 20 years.

The state’s total Catholic population, Harris projected, will grow by 5.6 million in the next 20 years – from just over 11 million now to 16.7 million in 2025. The state’s total population is expected to grow from about 37 million to nearly 46 million by 2025.