

# Hundreds of Catholics visit state legislators

ANNAPOLIS – Last year, three people from St. John Parish in Westminster attended the annual Catholics in Annapolis event. This year, a full busload of 56 people from the parish attended the issues briefing Feb. 21 and visited local legislators to promote the church's position on issues including physician-assisted suicide, BOOST funding and a proposed constitutional amendment on abortion.

Father Mark Bialek, St. John's pastor, said the group visited with Sen. Justin Ready and Del. Susan W. Krebs, both of whom are Republicans from Carroll County's District 5, and discussed BOOST, the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today program that provides scholarships for students who are eligible for the free or reduced-price meals program. Awards are granted based on household income, with the lowest income served first.

"There is a need for more funding for low-income families,' Father Bialek said. "There is a growing population in Carroll County who need help to attend Catholic school."

The parishioners also discussed their opposition to the bill known as the "End of Life Options Act," which would allow physician-assisted suicide in Maryland. One parishioner who is a nurse in hospice care especially addressed her concerns. Father Bialek noted that Krebs also works in hospice care and agreed it would better to put money into palliative care to reduce pain for those who are terminally ill than to allow physician-assisted suicide.

The pastor said that with so many new legislators in the general assembly, those opposing PAS are trying to get the legislators to vote with the feelings of their constituencies, which generally oppose the bill, not the party line.

"It's going to be close," Father Bialek predicted.

Jennifer Briemann, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the dioceses serving the state, said before a Catholics in

Annapolis evening reception that now that the hearings on the PAS bill are over, a vote could come any time.

“This is the time for people to contact their legislators and connect with the coalition” that is opposing passage of the bill, she said. Compassion and Choices, a group that advocates for physician-assisted suicide, “pulled out all the stops.”

Shirley Mathai, a parishioner of St. Louis the King in Clarksville, brought her daughter Maya with her to Catholics in Annapolis for the second time. Mathai said it was sad to see physician-assisted suicide “marketed as compassion. It’s marketing over truth.”

Mathai also said she was concerned about a possible constitutional amendment that would prohibit any regulations against abortion in the state. “If that gets passed, eventually there will be no controls” to protect the dignity of life. “The floodgates are open,” she said.

House of Delegates Speaker Michael Busch said Feb. 24 he was withdrawing the legislation to enshrine abortion into the state Constitution for consideration this session, although he is expected to reintroduce it next year so that the amendment would go to referendum in the November 2020 election.

Maya Mathai, an eighth-grader at St. Louis school, said she participated in Catholics in Annapolis because “just like my mom, I believe in life. That’s how I was raised. I think it’s important to advocate.”

The event began with a rosary and briefing on issues such as human trafficking and fetal homicide, both of which have bills before the legislature that are supported by the MCC, which represents the archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington, which includes several Maryland counties, and the Diocese of Wilmington, which covers Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

The group was larger than recent years, with more than 400 attending.

After meetings with legislators, attendees gathered for a reception where they were addressed by Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori and Washington Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville, and serenaded by the Cardinal Shehan School choir of

Baltimore.

*Also see:*

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