

# MCC leader says special session helped the poor

On the same day Maryland lawmakers concluded a three-week special legislative session to address the state's budget deficit Nov. 19, the leader of the Maryland Catholic Conference praised lawmakers for making the poor a priority in their planning.

At the same time, Richard J. Dowling, MCC executive director, said he was disappointed lawmakers approved a public referendum to legalize 15,000 slot machines in Maryland, a move he said could lead to expanded gambling in the form of casinos.

As part of a package that raises taxes by about \$1.3 billion, lawmakers restructured the state's income tax rates. Amending a proposal by Gov. Martin J. O'Malley that would have established six income-tax brackets, lawmakers created three new brackets - introducing a more progressive tax model requiring those who make more money to pay more taxes.

Under the new bracket system, top-earners will pay a 5.5 percent rate for single and joint filers earning \$500,000 or more a year. Marylanders had previously paid what amounted to a virtual flat tax with the top income-tax bracket applying to all who earned more than \$3,000 a year.

Mr. Dowling said Maryland's bishops support the more progressive model because it is a way of reducing inequalities of income and wealth.

"Our position reflects Catholic social teaching, and we thought that the governor's income tax proposal came about as close to Catholic social teaching as you can get," said Mr. Dowling, noting that a primary responsibility of government is to help meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable in society.

"We believe the tax system should be continually evaluated in terms of its impact on the poor," he said. "It should raise sufficient revenue for the public needs of society."

Mr. Dowling said he was especially pleased that lawmakers approved expanded healthcare coverage for the poor. The legislature passed a law making healthcare more affordable for small businesses while expanding Medicaid eligibility to lower-income parents and non-parent adults. Lawmakers also increased Maryland's refundable Earned Income Tax Credit to 25 percent of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, a move Mr. Dowling said would provide assistance to low-income families.

Mr. Dowling said he hoped the actions of the legislature demonstrate a new willingness to support the poor and vulnerable.

"For 16 years since the beginning of the second Schaefer administration, funding for programs for the poor have taken a backseat to other initiatives," he said. "We're hoping that's going to change."

Mr. Dowling said he regretted that lawmakers paved the way for slots in Maryland. Voters will decide the issue in the November, 2008 election.

"We have no doubt slot machines will pave the way for casino operations of the kind we see elsewhere around the country," he said. "People who feel compelled to gamble are customarily the people who can least afford it."

Mr. Dowling added that "gambling enterprises impact communities and neighborhoods in ways most people just don't want to see - bringing crime, drugs, alcoholism and related social maladies."