NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Connecticut abandons probe of church lobbying

Catholic News Service | Jul. 1, 2009

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. -- Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport praised the Connecticut attorney general June 30 for his opinion urging state ethics officials to stop investigating whether the diocese violated state lobbying laws with its efforts to rally Catholics against legislation that would have given laypeople financial control of their parishes.

Lori called the opinion from Attorney General Richard Blumenthal "a truly significant announcement that stands not just with our state's Catholics but with all citizens of the state whose fundamental civil liberties were placed in jeopardy" by application of the lobbying laws in this case.

Carol Carson, executive director of the Office of State Ethics, told *The Hartford Courant* newspaper that the ethics advisory board would meet in closed session July 1 to discuss the diocese's case in light of Blumenthal's opinion.

The controversy centered on whether the diocese violated laws governing lobbying groups by organizing a March 11 rally at the Connecticut Capitol in Hartford to oppose a bill that would have changed how parishes were governed in the state.

The legislation had been withdrawn March 10, but the rally "proceeded as an expression of protest against what the church perceived as an unconstitutional and unacceptable intrusion on its internal affairs," Blumenthal noted in his opinion.

The diocese filed suit May 29 in U.S. District Court in Hartford, seeking a court order to stop state officials from what it called "an unconstitutional application of state lobbying laws" to church activities.

"Serious constitutional and other legal concerns raised by this lawsuit compel me to conclude that Connecticut's lobbying registration laws cannot and should not be enforced in this factual situation against the church," Blumenthal wrote.

He urged the state Legislature to "clarify or revise those laws to ensure that they continue to serve their important purposes -- avoidance of corruption or the appearance of corruption arising from paid lobbying -- while also preserving and encouraging legally protected political expression."

But Blumenthal affirmed that "the church's free expression activities -- communicating with its members on legislative issues of paramount importance and holding a rally at the seat of the Legislature to protest government action -- are clearly and unquestionably protected by the First Amendment."

"There are no opinions, rulings or regulations that would have fairly alerted the church that its conduct under these specific factual circumstances required it to either register with the (Office of State Ethics) or face enforcement action," he added.

The ethics office "should abandon its investigation or enforcement as to church activity regarding (the legislation) or similar future conduct -- and halt such future investigative or enforcement efforts -- unless and until the Legislature clarifies or revises the statute to address such constitutional concerns," Blumenthal said.

Lori said in a June 30 statement that "it is essential that citizens have the right to organize and communicate their views to their government without being required to register as lobbyists."

"We are hopeful that the opinion from the attorney general will allow us to concentrate even more of our energies in meeting the increased demand for social services in our state," the bishop said. "As the largest nongovernmental provider of educational and human services, we believe the Catholic Church is a critical part of the solution to our state's economic and social challenges."

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