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

# Leafleters arrested at Baltimore basilica

Paul McMullen Catholic News Service | Sep. 17, 2008

BALTIMORE (CNS) -- Two demonstrators were arrested for trespassing at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore Sept. 14.

After two men affiliated with Operation Rescue, a national anti-abortion group, refused to comply with repeated requests that they cease distributing political literature on church grounds, they were taken into custody by Baltimore City police.

The literature included an image of Sen. Barack Obama, the Democratic Party nominee for president, and read, "Is it immoral to vote for Obama for president?"

"Their literature was patently partisan, focusing on individual candidates, rather than issues," said Father Jeffrey Dauses, pastor of the basilica. "At no time were they inside the basilica, but they were on the patio in front of church. After repeated requests to leave church property, from security, a sacristan and myself, two of the four complied. The other two refused and were arrested."

Father Dauses said the protesters began distributing literature before the 9 a.m. Mass. The arrest report notes that the police responded at 10 a.m., as Father Dauses prepared to celebrate the 10:45 a.m. Mass.

According to an Operation Rescue spokesman, Brian Sherwood, 35, was released on his own recognizance later that day, and Joseph Landry, 27, was released Sept. 16, when his bond was reduced from $10,000 to $100.

On Sept. 12, Landry had notified Father Dauses by e-mail of Operation Rescue's intention to leaflet the basilica "parking lot and surrounding streets." Father Dauses responded that they would not be allowed on basilica property.

Baltimore Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien said in a statement that the board of governors of the Maryland Catholic Conference, or MCC, "has a policy that states that the only election-related materials to be distributed at parishes come from the diocesan bishop, the MCC, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops."

He said that "the distribution of materials that encourages Catholics to vote for one candidate over another is a violation of the guidelines governing all nonprofit organizations, including churches."

He said organizations that want "to make their voices heard" must do so "within the context and framework of the regulations that exist."

Archbishop O'Brien said that if the group had "approached the archdiocese or the parish and said that they wanted to promote a pro-life message that is consistent with church teaching and respectful of our guidelines for doing so, that would have been preferable to the aggressive and confrontational approach they employed."

"Advocates for life need to work with the local church to promote a culture of life and to make sure that this critical message is spread," he said. "This is our collective goal. For groups that simply don't agree with the

church's message or its methods of delivery, ambushing local parishes and their parishioners cannot be tolerated."

At the conclusion of the 10:45 a.m. Mass, Father Dauses addressed the issue.

"Several people were highly offended by the literature," Father Dauses told The Catholic Review, newspaper of the Baltimore Archdiocese. "I asked them to be mindful of the church focusing on issues rather than candidates. I asked them not to accept the literature, or to throw it away. A lot of people thanked me for addressing it."

According to Operation Rescue, Landry and Andrea Terry were arrested in a similar incident in St. Petersburg, Fla., in January 2008. Operation Rescue is highly critical of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which the group claims does not make a strong enough stand against abortion.

As of Sept. 16, the USCCB in a month's time had issued six documents on abortion, including a two-page fact sheet titled "Respect for Unborn Human Life: The Church's Constant Teaching."

An Operation Rescue leader said that the group intends "to have events that oppose the Obama-Biden ticket all over the country."

Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, said that Father Dauses "did exactly the right thing in getting these people off church property."

"We don't have a problem with political involvement," Dowling said. "We do have a problem with partisan politics. People are welcome to distribute literature on public sidewalks, but not on church grounds. These kinds of intrusions can be expected to be attempted, from both sides, as we get closer to the election."

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**Source URL (retrieved on *11/30/2015 - 16:19*):** http://ncronline.org/news/politics/leafleters-arrested-baltimore-basilica