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

Catholics had major role in passing nuclear treaty

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Jan. 18, 2011

U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev sign the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty at Prague Castle in Prague, Czech Republic, April 8. The landmark treaty will cut nuclear arsenals in both countries by about 30 percent. (CNS photo/Jason Reed, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- As Democratic and Republican senators pressed their divergent views on the New START agreement with Russia outlining the next phase of nuclear disarmament during final debate in December, a wide array of Catholics played a major role in getting the pact ratified.

From political insiders to people in the pews, Catholics provided a moral perspective on the need for the treaty, helping build the final 71-26 margin for ratification, several people working on the issue told Catholic News Service.

The effort by Catholics also helped keep the vote on schedule, preventing it from being pushed into 2011 when the likelihood of ratification would have been dimmer because of the loss of six Democratic seats in the Senate.

Both houses of the Russian parliament are reviewing the treaty and are expected to ratify it in the coming weeks.

No one contacted by CNS said that without the Catholic effort the treaty would have failed. But they acknowledged that the involvement of such a broad array of Catholic voices -- from Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien of Baltimore, who formerly headed the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, to Dave Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA -- ratification became much easier to accomplish in an era where bipartisan cooperation in Congress is almost nonexistent.

David Culp, legislative representative for the Quaker Friends Committee on National Legislation, heaped high praise on Catholics. He pointed to the efforts by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as key Catholic members of Congress and the Obama administration for leading the way.

"(Catholics) definitely have been the most active and most important faith-based group working on this," Culp said. "This has been an amazing effort (by Catholics) from top to bottom."

Pax Christi's Robinson described the Catholic effort as one that has naturally evolved given the church's

increasingly stronger stance against nuclear weapons.

"This is an example of people both on the inside and the outside able to apply their values and faith traditions on a really important public policy matter that is going to enhance security and move us down to the road to a nuclear weapons-free world," he said.

The new treaty calls for both countries to reduce their strategic arsenals -- weapons deployed on long-range missiles, bombers and submarines -- to 1,550 each. Under the previous START pact, which expired in December 2009, both countries reduced their strategic arsenals to 2,200 weapons each.

Key Catholic insiders working for the treaty's ratification included the likes of Vice President Joe Biden and aide Brian McKeon; Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations; Denis McDonough, deputy national security adviser; and Rose E. Gottemoeller, assistant secretary in the Department of State's Bureau of Verification, Compliance and Implementation, who was the lead U.S. negotiator of the agreement.

Gottemoeller, who holds a degree in Russian from Georgetown University, told CNS she welcomed the "high level of interest" in nuclear disarmament among people of faith, especially Catholics and evangelicals.

"It was important to engage people's interest and to have the Catholic bishops of the United States and Catholic organizations to step forward and speak about the importance of the issue and engage the public," she said.

At the White House, two staffers speaking on background, said their work was motivated by the president's desire to get the treaty ratified as opposed to adhering to the teaching of any particular faith. Both welcomed the comments of people of faith, saying those views were "taken into account" as strategies for approaching senators sitting on the fence were formed.

Stephen Colecchi, director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace, explained that the bishops staked out their position on the treaty soon after Obama announced April 8 in Prague that he and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the arms reduction pact.

"The fact that Catholics were leading the effort is not a surprise to me," Colecchi said.

He said 30 bishops -- a much larger number than on most legislative issues other than same-sex marriage, abortion and health care -- contacted senators at various times in 2010.

Leading the way was Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace. He regularly joined teleconferences and sent letters to the Senate on behalf of the conference.

The bishops were backed by hundreds of letters from religious orders as well as average Catholics who responded to a series of legislative alerts issued by Colecchi's office.

"The church's teaching on this is very clear and it's very clear on the issue of protecting human life and human dignity," Colecchi said, explaining why large numbers of people responded to the arms control issue.

Outside of the conference, as expected, organizations such as the Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns and Network, a Catholic social justice lobbying organization, also made their voices heard.

This time though, they were joined by the National Association of Evangelicals and organizations such as the Two Futures Project, headed by the Rev. Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, whose influence on social issues is gaining favor rapidly among more traditionally conservative Christians.

"This is an example of where the church's teaching formed and motivated people," Colecchi said. "I think we can be very proud of our church and very proud of our bishops."

Source URL (retrieved on *12/22/2014 - 06:23*): http://ncronline.org/news/catholics-had-major-role-passing-nuclear-treaty