

Reflection by Bishop James A. Murray on the MCC's

Fortieth Anniversary

The Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) was founded in 1963 by John Cardinal Dearden, Archbishop of Detroit. At the time, the Second Vatican Council had only reached the midpoint in its four sessions, which began on October 11, 1962 and concluded on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1965.

By establishing the MCC, Cardinal Dearden wisely anticipated the promulgation of the Council's Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12/7/65), which exhorted "Christians as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the gospel spirit.... The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God."¹

Ten years ago I was privileged to speak to the MCC staff. With the words of *Gaudium et Spes* in mind, I said that "this Conference has proven to be one of the many good results of the Second Vatican Council and a model for other ecclesiastical provinces." For forty years the Conference has ably served as the voice of the Catholic Church in Michigan on many, and diverse, issues of public policy. In so doing, it has played a major role in making sure that the Catholics of Michigan perform their duty as citizens "conscientiously and in response to the gospel spirit." For four decades the Michigan Catholic Conference, through its Board of Directors and its dedicated staff, has labored energetically to promote the common good for all Michigan's citizens by its advocacy for "peace, freedom and equality, respect for human life and for the environment, justice and solidarity." *Doctrinal Note on the Participation of Catholics in Political Life – Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*

A good benchmark against which to evaluate the efficacy of the Conference is, in my opinion, Pope John Paul II's *Apostolic Exhortation to the Church in America, Ecclesia in America*, (1/22/99). This pivotal document addressed to the "Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Men and Women Religious and the Lay Faithful in America" (North, Central, South, and the Caribbean) is the Holy Father's response to the Synod of America which he convened in Rome in the Fall of 1997. The Synod had 297 participants (mostly bishops) from every nation in the hemisphere who gave over 200 speeches on the theme "Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: The Way to Conversion, Communion, and Solidarity in America." From the speeches, the synod participants agreed on 76 final propositions which in turn became the framework of Pope John Paul's Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*.

Earlier the Pope had proposed a synodal meeting aimed at broadening perspectives “with a view to increase cooperation between different particular Churches” (dioceses) in addressing “the problems relating to justice and solidarity among all the nations of America.” In as much as *Ecclesia in America* represents the lived experience of the contemporary Church in our own part of the world, it provides a good standard for judgment.

It might be well to begin with Francis Cardinal George’s, Archbishop of Chicago, definition of solidarity as a human virtue or a “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, because we are all really responsible for all.” The mission statement of the MCC echoes Cardinal George’s notion of solidarity as it calls upon itself to promote “a social order that respects the dignity of the human person and serves the common good in the spirit of the Beatitudes and in accord with the (social) teachings of the Catholic Church.”

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Ecclesia in America observes that “in order to speak of conversion, the gap between faith and life must be bridged. Where this gap exists, Christians are such only in Name.”² It also states candidly that “constant dedication to the poor and disadvantaged emerges in the Church’s social teaching, which ceaselessly invites the Christian community to a commitment to overcome every form of exploitation and oppression. It is a question not only of alleviating the most serious and urgent needs, through individual actions here and there, but of uncovering the roots of evil and proposing initiatives to make social, political and economic structures more just and fraternal.”³

Through its public statements, frequent testimonies as part of the Michigan legislative process, participation in various coalitions and promotion of ballot initiatives, the Conference has opposed the evils of abortion, racism, regressive taxes on food and drugs, Medicaid funding of abortion, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. Positively, the Conference has proposed greater justice for the poor, migrants, welfare recipients, non-public school students, the unborn, the elderly, marriage and the basic unit of society—the family.

All of the above were part of the MCC’s docket before *Ecclesia in America* made them the agenda for the Church throughout the hemisphere as the following citations illustrate:

- “Many insidious forces are endangering the solidity of the institution of the family in most countries of America, and these represent so many challenges for Christians. Among them we should mention the increase in divorce, the spread of abortion, infanticide and the contraceptive mentality... We need to reaffirm “that the foundation of human life is the conjugal relationship between husband and wife.”⁴
- “It is appropriate to recall that the foundation on which all human rights rest is the dignity of the person.”⁵
- “The goal of the Church is to ensure that no one is marginalized.”⁶
- “Nowadays, in America... a model of society appears to be emerging in which the powerful predominate, setting aside and even eliminating the powerless: I am thinking here of unborn children,

helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism. Nor can I fail to mention the unnecessary recourse to the death penalty....”

“It is essential to promote knowledge of the Church's social doctrine and to work so that the values of life and family are recognized and defended in social customs and in State ordinances.”

“...with the Pastors of the People of God in America, I appeal to “Catholics working in the field of medicine and health care, to those holding public office or engaged in teaching, to make every effort to defend those lives most at risk, and to act with a conscience correctly formed in accordance with Catholic doctrine.”⁷

- “A State monopoly in (the field of education) must be condemned as a form of totalitarianism which violates the fundamental rights which it ought to defend, especially the right of parents to provide religious education for their children. The family is the place where the education of the person primarily takes place.”⁸

Finally, I turn to the unique and highly valued service which the Michigan Catholic Conference staff provides to the seven dioceses of the province, the 805 parishes, the over 14,000 priests and lay employees, and the 5,600 current lay retirees of the state. *Ecclesia in America* notes the “important place in the Church's social doctrine of the right to dignified labor.”⁹

Obviously as an employer, the Church herself should practice what it preaches to secular employers. The bishops of the United States acknowledge as much in their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, “Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.”

The Conference service programs such as the lay employees' pension plan and the disability and health insurance benefits, satisfy in large part, the economic pastoral's charge to the Church herself. “All the moral principles that govern the just operation of the economic endeavor apply to the Church and its institutions, indeed the Church should be exemplary.”

For forty years the Michigan Catholic Conference has responded to the call of the Second Vatican Council and to the more recent one from the Holy Father's post-synodal exhortation to the “Church in America.” Both in its Public Policy and its Service Division, the Conference has been a very effective protector of “the foundation of which all human rights rest... the dignity of every human being.”

Let all citizens be mindful of their simultaneous right and duty to vote freely in the interest of advancing the common good. The Church regards as worthy of praise and consideration the work of those who, as a service to others, dedicate themselves to the welfare of the state and undertake the burdens of this task. *Gaudium et Spes*

1. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43

2. *Ecclesia in America*, 26; 3. *Ibid*, 18; 4. *Ibid*, 46; 5. *Ibid*, 57; 6. *Ibid*, 58; 7. *Ibid*, 63; 8. *Ibid*, 71; 9. *Ibid*, 54



The Michigan Catholic Conference building was dedicated to Glorify God and to Serve People, March 12, 2003 celebrating the Conference's Fortieth Anniversary.

Upon this 40th Anniversary, the Conference recognizes His Eminence Edmund Cardinal Szoka and the retired Michigan Diocesan Bishops: Most Reverend Joseph M. Breitenbeck, Most Reverend Paul V. Donovan, Most Reverend Robert J. Rose and Most Reverend Mark F. Schmitt.

To commemorate our forty year history, the Conference has produced a special twelve minute video that honors its work and past achievements. The video will help the viewers gain an appreciation for the distinguished service of the Conference on public issues of Justice and Life. Viewers will learn that the Conference stands ready to face the challenges of a changing society. As borne out by its past record of milestone accomplishments, the Conference will continue speaking out in love and compassion as the voice of the Catholic Church on public policy for the people of Michigan.

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