

MASSACHUSETTS BILL FAILS

On January 24, Bill Donohue appeared on Neil Cavuto's show on the Fox News Network debating Marian Walsh, the sponsor of the Massachusetts House bill that was designed to force religious institutions to provide the government with financial data. The next day, Walsh's bill was defeated: of the 150 lawmakers who voted, only two of Walsh's colleagues sided with her.

Walsh wanted to require all religious organizations that have annual revenues of more than \$500,000 to file annual financial reports, and to report real estate holdings to the attorney general's office. Driving the bill was anger over rulings made by the Archdiocese of Boston to close some parishes and schools. Some of the laity felt excluded from Archbishop O'Malley's decisions and thought that this bill would help make the archdiocese more accountable.

The major problem with the bill, aside from its dubious constitutionality, was its reach: all religious institutions were covered by the same strictures. This ignited a coalition of religious groups to protest Walsh's bill: they knew what was at stake for them.

Rev. Dr. Diane C. Kessler, executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, said it best: "We are concerned about the impropriety of using the legislative arm of government to deal with an internal conflict of one church and the dangerous precedent of the legislature getting into the business of regulating and...reforming religious institutions." This reasoning prompted Donohue to tell Walsh that "Protestants and Jews and Muslims are standing up against this."

Donohue also challenged Walsh and the need for the bill in the first place. After she said that her bill would force the religious organizations "to make an annual financial report,"

Donohue held up a copy of the Boston Archdiocese's report. "It's a phony issue," he said. "I have it right here, the annual financial report. Anybody can download it from the Internet, from the Archdiocese of Boston. Case closed."

It is important to note that Archbishop O'Malley repeatedly said that he was not opposed to making the archdiocese's financial report public. Indeed, the audit for 2005, soon to be released, will be the most complete detailed statement ever done. His complaint, shared by the Catholic League, was having the government mandate such a measure.

Last summer, the Catholic League opposed an initiative launched by some members of the Boston City Council to allow a referendum on the operations of the Archdiocese of Boston. Donohue said at the time that "The real purpose of this measure is to intimidate the Archdiocese of Boston by having an arm of the state whip the public into a frenzy about matters they have no constitutional business sticking their noses into."