

# VICTORY IN CONNECTICUT

In March, two Connecticut lawmakers sought to effectively take control of the Catholic Church in their state. Because Bridgeport Bishop William Lori, Hartford Archbishop Henry Mansell, the Connecticut Catholic Conference, the Catholic League, and thousands of Catholics all over the state fought back, the bill was quickly pulled. It proved to be a giant victory for Catholics loyal to the Magisterium and to the First Amendment provisions on religious liberty.

The big losers were dissident Catholics. Tom Gallagher, the person who proposed the takeover, is a contributor to the *National Catholic Reporter*, a left-wing newspaper unhappy with the Catholic Church as it exists. The driving force behind the takeover was Voice of the Faithful, a dissident group comprised mostly of senior citizens out to remake the Catholic Church.

Bill #1098 was introduced in the Connecticut legislature by Rep. Michael Lawlor and Sen. Andrew McDonald, both Democrats. Its express purpose is "To revise the corporate governance provisions applicable to the Roman Catholic Church and provide for the investigation of the misappropriation of funds by religious corporations."

The bill specifies that each parish is to elect a board of directors to run all parish functions, thus stripping the Pastor of his authority. As the *Hartford Courant* said, the bill "would take administrative and fiscal power away from priests and bishops and give it to parishioners." Moreover, it would only apply to the Catholic Church—all other religions would be totally unaffected by this power grab.

Not only was the bill clearly unconstitutional, the way it was handled made it even more odious. It was introduced on Thursday, March 5; the public did not know about it until the

following day. Hearings were scheduled for Wednesday, March 11. In other words, stealth-like tactics were used to slip the bill in with minimum input from Catholics.

The weekend after the bill was introduced, it led to a firestorm of protest. The Catholic League was contacted by members from all over the state. By the time the staff arrived at work on Monday, March 9, it was deluged with phone calls, e-mails and faxes from Catholics, as well as non-Catholics, from every part of Connecticut.

Bishop Lori and Archbishop Mansell implored Catholics to attend the public hearing. They announced that there would be buses galore to take Catholic students, teachers, parents, priests, nuns—anyone who wanted to go—to the event.

On March 9, Bill Donohue released a statement to the media saying, “More than that needs to be done.” He said, “Bishop Lori is correct to say that the bill ‘is a thinly-veiled attempt to silence the Catholic Church on the important issues of the day, such as same-sex marriage.’ Indeed, it is payback: this brutal act of revenge by Lawlor and McDonald, two champions of gay marriage, is designed to muzzle the voice of the Catholic Church.”

Because the Catholic Church was singled out, Donohue charged, “Lawlor and McDonald have demonstrated that they are ethically unfit to continue as lawmakers. They have evinced a bias so strong, and so malicious, that it compromises their ability to serve the public good.”

Donohue then called for their expulsion from the state legislature. “They should therefore be expelled by their colleagues. Reprimand and censure suggest that the offender can be rehabilitated. It is painfully obvious in this instance that neither lawmaker is prepared to accept such a sanction. Expulsion is the only rational response. We are contacting House leader Christopher Donovan and Senate leader Martin

Looney to explore this action.”

We also blanketed the media with our news release, getting more hits than usual. Very quickly, we heard from lawmakers on our side. A unanimous vote against the bill was delivered by Republican legislators. It was evident that our side had struck back so hard that the two Democratic lawmakers, and their supporters, were taken aback.

On Tuesday, March 10, the day before the scheduled hearing, McDonald and Lawlor pulled their bill. They said they did so at the behest of Gallagher, the person who initially proposed it.

When the bill was withdrawn, Donohue released another statement: “Every pre-law undergraduate knows what Lawlor and McDonald tried to pull off—in stealth fashion—was flagrantly unconstitutional. For their fascist stunt, they should at least be censured by their colleagues. Ideally, they should resign or be forced out of office.”

After information was revealed about the bill being pulled, those who sought a state takeover refused to apologize. In fact, Paul Lakeland, who is chairman of the Catholic Studies Department at Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution, said the bill did not violate the First Amendment because the bishops still had control over doctrinal matters. Then the *Hartford Courant* chimed in saying in an editorial that McDonald and Lawlor “were trying to help rank-and-file Catholics.”

But few Catholics, or non-Catholics for that matter, were fooled by Lakeland and the *Hartford Courant*. What the lawmakers sought to do was to implement the goals of left-wing Catholics who have long had one foot out the door. This time they ran into a brick wall.

It was very encouraging to see the way Connecticut Catholics rallied to support their bishops, and their religion.