

# VICTORY IN CONNECTICUT

As the term ended in May for the Connecticut State Legislature, a bill seeking to extend the statute of limitations in cases of sex abuse cases never came to a vote, thus securing a victory for Catholics. This victory was in no small part due to our tireless work in educating the public on how HB 5473 was inherently discriminatory towards the Catholic Church.

Just as we had seen in the past with the anti-Catholics in Colorado and New York, the “let’s-get-the-Church” gang was in full gear in Connecticut. None of those supporting the legislation, including the bill’s sponsor Rep. Beth Bye, was truly interested in combating child sexual abuse: if they were, they would not have given public institutions a pass. As it stood, the bill would have done absolutely nothing to bring relief to those who had been abused by a public school employee save for filing a civil suit against the individual.

Contrast that with a child abused by an employee of a Catholic school. Not only would the victim be able to file a suit against the individual, but the victim could then file suit against the diocese thus costing the Church millions of dollars.

As is the case in other states, public entities enjoy sovereign immunity from such claims and cannot be sued for damages unless a bill specifically authorizes it. Accordingly, we called Bye’s bluff: we said to make it inclusive of all institutions, public as well as private, or pull it.

It was hardly surprising that we heard nothing coming from the teachers’ unions and all of the other lobbyists for the public schools. They knew that if the statute of limitations was eliminated in cases of childhood sexual abuse that took place in public schools, many former administrators and teachers—to

say nothing of current school districts—would be forced to face the fire. We said that justice demands that they suffer the same fate of those in private institutions. Either that, or they should stop grandstanding and withdraw the discriminatory bill altogether.

We were pleasantly surprised when we found out that State Senator Andrew McDonald, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, opposed the legislation stressing the importance that statutes of limitations have in the judicial system. We were surprised because it was McDonald, along with Rep. Michael Lawlor, who in 2009 drafted a bill “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 was pulled because the Connecticut bishops, the Catholic League and thousands of Connecticut Catholics fought it.)

Soon after we learned of HB 5473, we spoke to someone at Rep. Bye’s office and were told that this bill *did* apply to public schools and that there is a difference between state employees and public school employees when it comes to sovereign immunity. After we heard this we said that it was time to end the duplicity and have an equal playing field for everyone regardless if they are employees of private or public institutions.

Accordingly, we extended a challenge to Bye: submit a bill that would repeal sovereign immunity for all public employees. Then, and only then, would Connecticut Catholics and Catholic institutions know that they would not be treated in a discriminatory manner in law.

Following our challenge to Bye, Voice of the Faithful in the Diocese of Bridgeport sent a letter to Connecticut lawmakers unjustly condemning the bishops for seeking to “mislead, mischaracterize and spin the facts in an effort to preserve their temporal, rather than spiritual authority.” In doing so, the organization went way beyond the pale for even a dissident

Catholic group—it portrayed an animus so vile as to rival the antics of rank anti-Catholics.

We wrote to the Connecticut Legislature and let them know that the Connecticut bishops speak for the Church in the state, not some morally bankrupt lay organization. In our letter we noted that some Catholics were falsely positioning themselves as being legitimate competitors to the voice of the bishops and that Voice of the Faithful were the most irresponsible.

We said: “To be sure, lay Catholics have a right to speak to all public policy issues that touch on the affairs of the Catholic Church. But no lay Catholic organization has the right to portray itself as a substitute to the canonical authority of the bishops. That is what Voice of the Faithful has done.”

We also noted that the supporters of Voice of the Faithful, unlike loyal lay Catholics who support the palpable reforms made by their bishops, have never found a reform worth cheering. In other words, there is nothing the bishops could ever do that would satisfy them.

We respectfully asked the lawmakers to weigh the real-life concerns of the bishops regarding the draconian implications of the bill. We also asked that they not be distracted by those who harbor an agenda of their own.

On May 3 our work paid off: proponents of the bill announced that there were not enough votes in the House or Senate to push the bill forward this year.

Although this bill failed to move forward, we will make sure to keep an eye on similar efforts in the future. Legislation like this seems to creep up from time to time