



Missouri Catholic Conference

Good News

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Bringing the Light of Christ to Missouri.

Priorities Misplaced in Closing Days of Legislative Session

In a normal year, the last day of a legislative session is like a track meet with ringing bells causing legislators to race to their chamber to vote. Lobbyists huddle in the third floor rotunda, anxiously checking the status of bills, discovering their bill is dead, or, lo and behold, it's alive and ready to be passed.

But on this year's final day everything was in slow motion. Legislators and lobbyists, exhausted from a long session and not expecting much to happen, shuffled about like zombies with no particular place to go.

The Missouri Senate passed only one bill on the last day and then adjourned, three hours before the 6 p.m. deadline. With no bills coming from the Senate, the House didn't have much to do. But just to show the public they were trying, the House Speaker would ask if there were any messages from the Senate. The House Clerk would dryly intone, "There are no messages from the Senate."

Meanwhile, those hoping to hear Senate debate over the Internet were told by Missouri Digital News: "If hear just silence, that means the Senate is probably not in session." In fact, there was no probability about it; the Senators had cleared out. In fact, a lot of people had cleared out; the session was over.

No messages, no action. What had happened?

Part of the answer went back to Tuesday night of that final week when Senate leaders employed a rarely used tactic to stop debate and pass the right-to-work legislation. Calling the previous question is the "nuclear option" to traditionalists, a betrayal of the sentiment carved on the granite walls of the Senate that "Free and Fair Discussion Will Ever Be Found the Firmest Friend to Truth." To a frustrated majority, however, it was time to take a vote and take a vote they did.

After Tuesday's fireworks, Senate business came to an abrupt halt. On Wednesday and Thursday mornings, the Senate simply approved the previous day's journal, and then adjourned. On Friday, the last day of the session, nothing happened until mid-afternoon when the body passed a routine but important Medicaid bill. SB 210 re-authorizes an existing tax health care providers pay to draw down matching federal dollars for Medicaid. After passing the Medicaid bill, the Senate adjourned, even though the body could have kept working until the 6 p.m. deadline.

Meanwhile, the House had its own drama to contend with. On Wednesday the Kansas City Star reported that House Speaker John Diehl had exchanged sexually charged text messages with a college freshman serving as a legislative intern. On Thursday the Speaker apologized and announced he would give up the Speakership and resign from the House. Later that night a Republican Caucus nominated Todd Richardson (R-Poplar Bluff) to be the new Speaker and the full House approved that move on Friday morning.

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Filing Bills is Not the Same as Solving Problems



Looking at the 2015 session one can lament the time and energy wasted. The legislative process is not efficient, nor is it meant to be, and most bills never pass. This year 2,113 bills were filed but legislators only passed 131 of them.

That's not all bad. A lot of bills filed are not ready for "prime-time," they need vetting by committees and lots of floor debate. It may take several years before an "idea" can be crafted into legislation that merits passage by the General Assembly.

One wonders, however, if so many bills need to be filed. In recent years bills have been filed because it is part of the agenda of some national lobbying group and think tank. These bills generate controversy and appeal to the base of one of the political parties but may do little to address the concerns of ordinary Missourians.

It would be better if legislators spent more time on bills addressing real problems. For example, most Missouri drivers would agree our roads and highways need a major overhaul. How to fund that overhaul is the question under debate. The General Assembly considered the issue some but eventually put the matter aside.

The best bills arise when legislators listen to their constituents and then formulate legislation to respond to their concerns. That's the way democracy is supposed to work. A big part of the mission of the Missouri Catholic Conference is to keep Catholic citizens informed so they can engage their legislators and ensure real problem-solving takes place in the Missouri Capitol.

Are you a MCC Network Member?

You may already be a MCC Citizens' Network member and receive our weekly email updates on current events and issues, but many who receive *Good News* are not members yet. Here is what you're missing: our weekly email update that provides short articles on current events and issues and Action Alerts when legislation is pending in Jefferson City or Washington, D.C.

Our Action Alerts include pre-composed messages so you can simply read the information and click a button to send a message to your legislators. Some people do not think constituent contacts make a difference, but that is not true. The active involvement of Catholic citizens mobilized by the MCC played a key role in overriding the governor's veto of the religious liberty bill (SB 749) in 2012. The Network also helped in the override of the governor's veto of legislation that ensured women had a 72-hour period of reflection before making a decision about an abortion.

We work hard to make our weekly email updates both informative and entertaining. For example, recent articles in our email updates have discussed the earthquakes in Nepal, the feast day of the Irish sailor St. Brendan, and tips on how to observe the month of Mary in May.

It is easy to become a member. Contact us with your email address in any of the following ways:

- Call us at (800) 456-1679 or (573) 635-7239
- Email us at mocatholic@mocatholic.org
- Visit our website at www.mocatholic.org to sign up or view past email updates

Also, do not hesitate to encourage your friends and neighbors to become a member of the MCC Network. Give them this *Good News* so they have our contact information.

Priorities Misplaced, *cont.*

The Diehl scandal and the right-to-work controversy pushed aside other legislative priorities. Collateral damage included a bill (HB 190) that would have required annual health and safety inspections of abortion clinics. Also not passing was SB 322, a bill sponsored by Senate President Pro Tem Tom Dempsey (R-St. Charles) that would have modestly increased the assets the disabled could have and still qualify for Medicaid health coverage.

The irony is that everyone knew Governor Nixon would veto the right-to-work bill and that the legislature lacked veto-proof majorities to override the veto. Still, the right-to-work bill had to move forward some felt, even though few in the Missouri workforce belong to unions or even know much about them.

The slow pace was not all bad. Not passed was SB 200, a bill that in its original form set the sentence for first degree murder by a juvenile at either 35 or 50 years, depending on the age of the juvenile, or life without parole. The MCC argued this didn't take into account how youth could reform their lives. The final week impasse stopped the bill in its tracks, which was not a bad outcome as the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to hear a case this fall that may set sentencing guidelines more in line with the restorative justice principles advanced by the MCC.

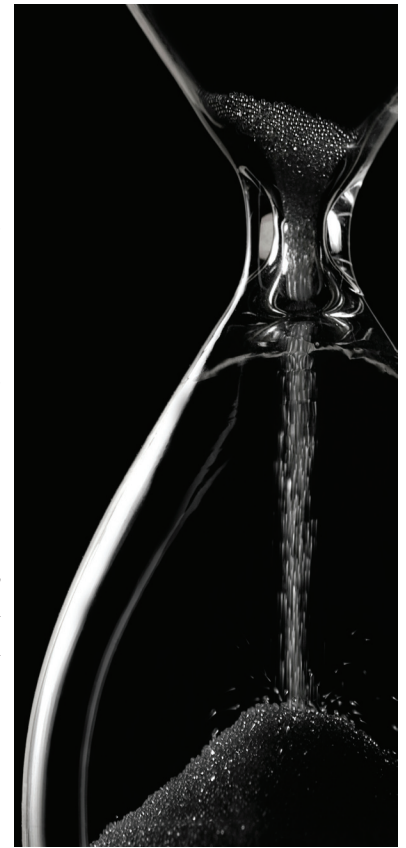
Most of the legislation that did pass was dealt with prior to the eruption over right-to-work. There is both good news and bad news to report. On the positive side, legislators approved over \$2 million in funding for alternatives to abortion services and over \$13 million in funding for Show-Me-Healthy Babies, a new program giving expectant mothers access to quality pre-natal care.

Also passed, was a bill (HB 501) to update the current sex education provided in public schools. The MCC supported this legislation to ensure students learn about sexual predators and the dangers of inappropriate text messaging. The passage of the bill showed that the General Assembly could act in a bipartisan fashion. The bill sponsor was State Representative Genise Montecillo, a St. Louis Democrat.

Some bipartisan work occurred on welfare reform. The MCC encouraged legislators to exchange ideas instead of political slogans and the result was a better bill than the one introduced, even though the final bill still met heated opposition. As approved, SB 24 cuts off cash benefits when a recipient fails to participate in work activities, but before this can occur there must be several face-to-face meetings with the recipient to see whether obstacles, such as lack of transportation or day care, can be overcome. Those provisions were not in the original bill; they were added after intense discussions between Republicans and Democrats.

The legislature also passed legislation (SB 224) prohibiting graduates of Missouri high schools from receiving certain college scholarships if they are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents. The MCC opposed the measure, pointing out that many of these students had come to Missouri as small children and attended Missouri K-12 schools all their lives. But on this issue, anti-immigrant sentiment trumped humanitarian concerns.

The 2015 session of the Missouri General Assembly produced a mix bag of good and bad legislation, but the final days offered a cautionary tale about how productive work can grind to a halt when people no longer work together for the good of the state. Let's hope next year legislators will finish the session by actually working until the deadline and trying to help ordinary Missourians, including those who have little political voice in the halls of the Missouri Capitol.



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Father Robert Barron, Coming to a Capitol Near You!

Nationally known Catholic educator and evangelist Father Robert Barron is coming to the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City on Saturday, October 3, to be the keynote speaker for the Missouri Catholic Conference (MCC) 2015 Annual Assembly. Save the date now! The MCC will send you more information this summer.

Father Barron is the founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries,

which is a nonprofit global media apostolate that reaches millions of people to draw them into— or back to— the Catholic faith. In addition to Father Barron's keynote address, the Annual Assembly will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council with many workshops on how the Catholic Church can continue the work of bringing the good news of Christ to all people.

