



State Senator Marian Walsh of West Roxbury testified yesterday on Beacon Hill in favor of a bill to open the books of religious groups. (Globe Staff Photo / John Tlumacki)

Archdiocese skips hearing, stirs ire Legislators back bill to disclose church finances

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By Michael Levenson, Globe Correspondent | August 11, 2005

No one from the Boston Archdiocese spoke at a packed Beacon Hill hearing yesterday on legislation that would force all religious groups to open their books to the public. The absence angered lawmakers who said they had hoped to discuss the Catholic Church's finances, real estate holdings, and efforts to restore parishioners' confidence.

To cheers from the audience, Republicans and Democrats voiced their support for the bill in forceful, often emotionally charged testimony that touched on the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the rebellion over parish closings in Greater Boston.

The hearing was an extraordinary demonstration of shifting attitudes on Beacon Hill, as lawmakers who had stood with the Catholic Church on issues such as abortion criticized its treatment of lay Catholics during the abuse scandal and its plan to close nearly one fourth of the parishes in the archdiocese. Years ago, "we were fearful of bringing issues of this nature up," Thomas P. O'Neill 3d, a former lieutenant governor and state representative, told members of the Judiciary Committee. "It is historic."

The Massachusetts Council of Churches, a group representing 1,700 Orthodox and Protestant churches, joined the Massachusetts Family Institute, a conservative Christian group, and the Catholic Action League, a lobbying group, in opposing the bill. They argued the measure would trample religious liberty, cost churches exorbitant accountants' fees, and set a dangerous precedent in giving the state oversight of churches' financial decisions.

"This legislation will constitute unwarranted intrusion and excessive entanglement in the lives of all churches," said Laura E. Everett of the Council of Churches.

But notably absent from the four-hour hearing was any testimony from the archdiocese, which faced the brunt of lawmakers' criticism and whose refusal to disclose financial information motivated state Senator Marian Walsh to write the bill.

"I think their silence is deafening," Walsh, a West Roxbury Democrat, said after the hearing. "I hoped that we would hear from them."

Edward F. Saunders Jr., executive director of the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, the policy arm of the archdiocese, said in an interview that church leaders oppose the bill and made that known privately to lawmakers. "We presented written testimony, and we felt that was sufficient," he said.

Legislators felt otherwise.

"This directly affects the church, and we do not have anybody here," said the Senate minority leader, Brian P. Lees, a Republican from East Longmeadow. "I'm a little surprised."

The bill, backed by 35 lawmakers and Secretary of State William F. Galvin, would require all religious organizations to file annual financial statements and a list of real estate holdings with the attorney general. About 30,000 charities in Massachusetts are subject to the requirement.

"Financial transparency can better ensure moral transparency," Walsh said.

Among the lay Catholics testifying was Dorothy Kennedy, a retired parochial schoolteacher from Natick who described a rocky experience after a new pastor came in and took control of parish funds. "We had no way to monitor the books," she said. "We had no way to find help in our situation."

The thrust of the archdiocese's opposition, Saunders said, comes from concerns over religious independence.

"Mainly on the issue of separation of church and state," Saunders said. "The bill was being presented as a mere reporting bill and it's much, much more than that. By eliminating the religious exemption, it subjects all religions to second-guessing of the internal operations of that religion by the attorney general, to the point where, by various steps, he could go in and change the decisions of the head of any religious organization."

Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly has similar concerns about the state being too involved in the finances of religious organizations, a spokesman said yesterday.

"The attorney general certainly believes there's a real need for more openness and transparency on the part of religious institutions . . . particularly when it comes to their financial information," said spokesman Corey Welford. "His concern has been how this bill plays out after enactment."

Religious organizations were required to disclose their finances under a law passed in 1930, Galvin said. But they were exempted by the Legislature in 1954, he said. That exemption, Galvin said, amounted to a "cloak of secrecy" for the Catholic Church that allowed the payment of "hush money" that kept the sexual abuse scandal hidden for years.

Since Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley was installed as leader of the archdiocese two years ago, some \$200 million in church real estate has been liquidated, with little explanation of where the proceeds went, Galvin said. His testimony was interrupted by applause from the audience, many from the Council of Parishes and the Voice of the Faithful, lay Catholic groups that have sought a greater role for parishioners in church affairs. ■