

Legislative Wrap-up of the 61st Legislative Session

The 61st legislative session is in the books. The legislators went home on April 30th after using the entire 90 days to get their work done, but they did it and they did it with class. On the final day the conference committee crafted a final budget bill that was more than the fiscal conservatives wanted but less than the social liberals wanted. It was a compromise crafted by both parties and both legislative chambers. Although there were some last minute moves to eliminate the veto proof margin, this agreement showed us all that our elected officials can be true statesmen and stateswomen. The session ended on a positive note, much unlike the 2007 session that went home without a budget, and enough hard feelings that no agreement was even on the horizon.

This legislature also proved that an evenly split House, a Republican controlled Senate and a Democrat controlled Governors office can work together effectively. There certainly were glitches along the way, but overall our elected officials completed the people's work and represented the people well.

As the dust settles in the hallways of the Montana State Legislature, and the abandoned hallways and committee rooms merely hold the memories of this past legislative session, we should take time to consider the results of the 2009 session. There were bills we supported that did pass and others that did not. There were bills that we opposed that did pass, and some that passed with a compromise that we did not fully support. Victory and defeat in the legislature can not be measured merely in numbers of bills passed or defeated. Even in those bills that did not pass, such as the death penalty abolition, we were able to use that effort as an educational opportunity. We traveled the state and were in numerous parishes, community centers and schools as we told the stories of a broken system that is beyond repair. Hearts changed and a poll released near the end of the session showed a majority of those polled supported life without parole over use of the death penalty. That's a huge swing from previous polls.

The process is the same for other issues. We did not pass the Parental Notification law, the Protection for Mothers to be, or the Conscience Protection for Pharmacists Law, but now we have an opportunity to raise awareness on these issues. We will be traveling the state to speak out on these and other Catholic issues, and hopefully create support to pass several of these bills next session.

The need to focus on Catholic Social Teaching and the respect and dignity of all life has never been greater. Life, poverty, mental health, and prison reform issues are complex and contentious, but they are also critical to the well being of all of us. We need to pray for all those who work on these issues, and for the elected officials that will vote on them in 2011. We will also be planning events in the next couple years, and would welcome feedback from you on what and where.