

Church flexes muscles on partial-birth abortion

By Neal J. Conway

It is probably a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence and certainly a historical event when all of the nation's cardinals come together for a public appearance joined by numerous bishops, one from as far away as The Philippines. But just one week before the House of Representatives voted to override President Clinton's veto of the partial-birth abortion ban, come together they did at the West Front of the Capitol in a public demonstration of strength rare for the Church in the Modern World.

The press conference and prayer service led by Cardinals Hickey and

Keeler were the culmination of one of the most dramatic grassroots efforts touched off by Church leadership in years. Indeed, it appears to be unprecedented. Behind the cardinals as a wall of boxes filled with the petition post cards, some 250,000, that you signed outside your churches in recent weeks. And these were just of local origin, the ones destined for Maryland's senators.

"Thousands more cards are on the way!" promised Cardinal Keeler when he took the podium. Throughout the country, 23 million postcards were distributed.

"It's a good demonstration of solidarity by the hierarchy of The

Church," said Thomas A. Hogan, Virginia State Deputy of The Knights of Columbus. Supreme Knight Virgil Dechant was also present as were C.U. President Bro. Pat Ellis, F.S.C. and presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan.

Public attendance has been estimated at over 1,000. Some commented that the turnout at this afternoon event was sparse. By the time they prayer service started, the terrace at the base of the steps leading up to The Capitol was nearly packed with more

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arriving. Busloads of Catholic school students came, mostly it seemed, from the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Our Lady of Good Counsel, Mother of God (Gaithersburg) and St. Catherine Labouré were three Montgomery County schools observed to have representatives present. There to greet all arrivals with warm handshakes and smiles was "His Genial Excellency," Auxiliary Bishop, Leonard Olivier.

The secular media. Right off the bat, one reporter asked why there was such a show of solidarity for this particular issue and not others such as welfare reform. This drew a "teichy" response from Cardinal Law of Boston.

"The bishops have been consistent on speaking out on poverty and other issues!" he fumed. "It is a 'red herring' to suggest that our presence here is a sign that we are focused singularly!"

One blessing - and probably a disappointment for beaheen reporters - was the remarkable absence of pro-abortion demonstrators holding up "Keep Abortion Legal" signs. They

had held their press conference earlier in the day.

This, however, meant that coverage of the event endured no more than a few seconds on television news as the opposition wasn't present to be shown in a more favorable light than the bishops or "Her Smoothness," Helen Alvaré, a tough match for pro-choicers, anyway. *The Washington Times* printed a picture of the cardinals on its front page while *The Washington Post's* "Inside" directed readers to its story about "The Catholic Lobby." The Post story did mention the presence of Protestant ministers but did not quote Methodist Pastor George Anderson saying, "This is not a Catholic issue! It is a moral issue and a human issue!"

As of this writing (Sept. 22), the US Senate has yet to vote on the override of Clinton's veto on the ban of what Cardinal Hickey called "The barbaric slaying of children even as they are being born." Alvaré admits that pro-life forces are 12 votes short of the two-thirds needed to override and stayed a few minutes after Mass at St. Jane's this morning to send up some extra prayers for a turn around.

Whatever the outcome, the bishops' campaign accomplished two things: It was able to keep its first sustained public focus on the barbarity of the abortion act and it demonstrated that the Catholic Church is still capable of whipping up a great big wave to roll against the cliffs of sin.



"His Genial Excellency," Auxiliary Bishop Leonard Olivier, poses with a young man from St. Catherine Labouré School, one of three Montgomery County schools represented at the Bishops' Press Conference/Prayer Service for the override of the partial-birth abortion ban veto



Thumbs up from "Her Smoothness" Before enceeding the Capitol Hill press conference and prayer service, Helen Alvaré, Director of the NCCB's Pro-life Secretariat shows optimism about the US Congress' override of Clinton's veto of the partial-birth abortion ban.

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"Church Flexes Muscle on partial-birth abortion" by Neal J. Conway was first published in the October 6, 1996 issue of *Our Parish Times*. Neal Conway is the author of *Tales From Old Bethesda* and lives in Washington, DC. See nealjconway.com. Subject: Catholic newspaper article about Catholic rally at U.S Capitol before 1996 House of Representatives effort to override President Clinton's veto of bill to ban partial birth abortion. Picture of Helen Alvaré (Helen Alvaré) and Auxiliary Bishop Leonard Olivier of the Archdiocese of Washington.