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Retiring activist nun looks back

In politics, as in life, you win some and you lose some.

Nobody knows that better than Sister Monica Kostielney, president of the Michigan Catholic Conference, public policy arm of the Catholic Church in Michigan, who announced last week she will retire after a 38-year career.

A native of Detroit's west side, Kostielney, or Sister Monica as she is almost universally known, first ventured into the public arena in 1972. That was when she took a leave from a teaching job in a Catholic school in Grand Rapids to work on the defeat of a ballot proposal that would have legalized abortion in Michigan. That November, 60% of state voters sided with her.

Then in January 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark Roe v. Wade ruling, legalizing abortion in all 50 states.

In the years since, she's advocated for tax breaks for the poor, the preservation of traditional marriage, against government-funded abortion and on both sides of a host of other issues. She has won more than she's lost

But Sister Monica, 72, said she doesn't keep score. She says she can "honestly say I never had a bad day," and is gratified to have played a role in consequential policy decisions for more than three decades. Although much remains undone, she said leaving now is "the right thing at the right time."

"There will always be monumental issues."

Here are excerpts from her conversation with the Free Press on Friday:

Question: Why are you leaving now?

Sister Monica: I'm leaving when everything is in good order. There are major problems and monumental issues in our work. But there will always be...

There are other people that can step up to the plate, that can work and carry out the mission of the Conference.

Q: Tell me about that first campaign in '72 (to legalize abortion), the one that brought you here?

Sister Monica: I totally did not know politics. I came right from the classroom. I came to offer my services. I knew that it was an issue that I was willing to commit myself to and devote my time and energies to. And we were victorious.

Only to have it overturned by the Supreme Court.

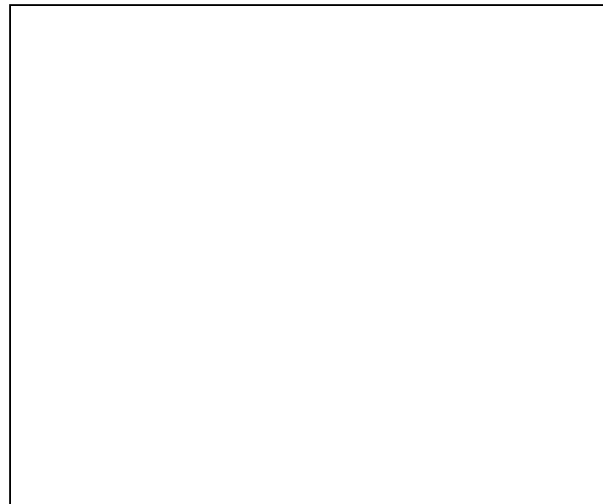
That was kind of a watershed. While it was my first entrance into the political arena, it really was a defining moment.

Q: What other ballot proposals has the conference played a role in?

Sister Monica: In order, I can't keep track.

Very soon after, we worked very hard (for) the

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removal of (sales) tax from food and drugs. We had education proposals... (for) vouchers. (Against) Assisted suicide. (Against) Medicaid funding of abortion. (For one man-one woman) marriage. (For) affirmative action. (Against) stem cells (research using cells derived from human embryos).

Q: You won most of the time. But not always. On education, the church had a string of losses over time, and parochial or vouchers seem more remote than ever. What went wrong?

Sister Monica: Part of the reason for that I think are the institutions that are opposed to change.

Q: Who are you talking about?

Sister Monica: I think the major groups, I think the MEA was very reluctant. People who cherished and wanted local control of their own schools. I think there were also people who saw it as a church-state separation issue. And it's hard to explain to the public that private or Catholic or religious schools serve a public function.

Q: What's been the results of having failed to win public acceptance of financial support for kids in private or religious schools? How does educational opportunity in Michigan today compare to the 1960s?

Sister Monica: Freedom is very liberating. And any time you limit freedom we all stand to hurt. So when we have limited freedom of non-public schools to exist, many people were hurt. Parents, children, society. Competition is a good thing.

Q: So education opportunity is diminished? Are the chances that a kid is going to get a good education less today?

Sister Monica: It almost depends on the socio-economic division they're in. And that's what's regrettable. Education should not depend on the ability of parents to pay or the neighborhood they live in. And that's exactly what's happened. Children should not be deprived of a good

education because of where they live.

Q: Do you think there will come a time when the people of Michigan will approve a voucher or parochial program?

Sister Monica: I think the language will have to change. I think that parochial will not be in the lexicon. And I'm not sure vouchers are the solution. I think there are other ways it could be approached. A tax credit might be one.

Those are, I would say, temporary fixes. We need to appreciate that competing schools can enrich our lives, society.

Will it come? I really hope it's not too late.

Q: Do you rank some of the issues you've worked on here? Is something like the food and drug tax exemption more or less important than, say, the stem cell ballot proposal? I ask this in part because there are those who believe the church is fixated on abortion and the life issues.

Sister Monica: I view the life issue not in a list of prioritized issues or goals for the year. I view the life issue as a foundational issue. As such, it is the reason and the source for all other issues.

If there is an inherent dignity in the human person made in the image and likeness of God,

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then all these other issues become relevant. Then that human person has rights of clothing, home, food, education. Those flow from the very nature of what we believe that human person is.

Priorities become necessary by need, by legislative action, by what certain groups are bringing up.

The life issue doesn't become the core issue because the Church says so. The Church says so because it is right. It is very hard to deny that the human person is not central, is not made in the divine image, does not have basic rights.

Q: Why do you think there is the perception, to the extent that it exists, that the Church is too obsessive about the life issues?

Sister Monica: I think that's so because we have not taught it sufficiently. And we're charged with that when there is public contention. But not when things are quieted down.

There is a loss of civil discourse.

I've often asked in the abortion issue, for instance, a right to what? Our position is, a right to life. But what's the other side?

We have not really engaged in true dialogue and conversation on the issue.

Q: Not even during a campaign?

Sister Monica: A campaign is not the time to do it. That's all sound bites and ads. And whoever has the cleverest ad might be successful.

The opposing side has succeeded in part in suggesting that we're engaged in trying to limit human freedom. That's a strong impulse in American, human culture...to be free. But it totally ignores the human being that we're focused on.

Q: What was the most meaningful, the most significant success in your career?

Sister Monica: I probably don't think in those terms.

Let me say this. My workplace has been the public square. There have been a range of challenges, The opportunity to be there, to make some contribution for the common good, for individual betterment, for justice...is in fact the greatest. Life, justice, those are issues of critical importance.

Q: Do you have a favorite politician?

Sister Monica: I think we go back to those with whom we grew up.

I have great admiration for (former legislator and current U.S. Rep.) Dale Kildee. He's been a longtime friend... a hard worker.

I think of ... (former House Speaker) Bill Ryan.

We've had many good politicians. I don't want to offend anybody by not mentioning them.

Q: Do you have a favorite governor?

Sister Monica: Well, Every governor was different. Michigan governors seem to be shaped radically by the time they're in. Blanchard, Milliken, Engler, now Granholm.

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We've had agreements and disagreements with each of them.

Gov. Blanchard we continued to meet with and work closely with despite our differences (Blanchard, and Gov. William Milliken before him repeatedly vetoed legislative attempts to end Medicaid-paid abortion). Gov. Engler, we limited our attention to those areas we agreed on.

Gov. Granholm is very idealistic. Her approach is one of idealism...of what she hopes could be. Each one has vetoed issues we thought were important.

I don't have a favorite governor.

I remember one that had a staff that was a lot more fun... Gov. Blanchard.

Q: It occurs to me that on the foundational issue you talked about earlier the governor who shared your views was John Engler, yet I sense he wasn't your favorite?

Sister Monica: John Engler did not support our educational effort. But we agreed on a lot of other issues.

Q: What about big disappointments?

Sister Monica: In terms of the large, long term issues, not having achieved educational justice. Having worked on so many education campaigns...We have not made significant progress.

And education is so central. Education is really the abiding solution to our current problems.

In terms of a more recent failure, I still think our loss on the embryonic stem cell issue there was a lack of understanding on the substance of the issue.

We heard over and over again that we were opposed to cures. And that was not the case at all. We're not opposed to stem cell experimentation...to making strides. And that

somehow never got across.

It was somehow that we were opposed to science, that we were opposed to progress.

Q: What are you going to do in retirement?

Sister Monica: This summer I'm going to Oberammergau (a village in Bavaria which every 10 years since the 17th century has produced an epic passion play in gratitude for surviving the plague). It is seven hours long...with a two hour break.

And then I'm really anxious to get back in an academic setting. I'm going to seek an educational sabbatical and update myself in a spirituality and theology. To look at scripture and morality.

I hope to learn to love more deeply, to appreciate more deeply...to become a better person.

No more teaching, but maybe some mentoring or tutoring.

Q: Are you done with politics? Can you imagine yourself becoming involved in trying to help someone get elected?

Sister Monica: I'll stay engaged.

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The conference has been really clear in its legal right and responsibility to make a moral statement and to work on issues. But we cannot endorse or fund (candidate) campaigns. And we're squeaky clean on that. I've not given any thought to whether I would do something personally.

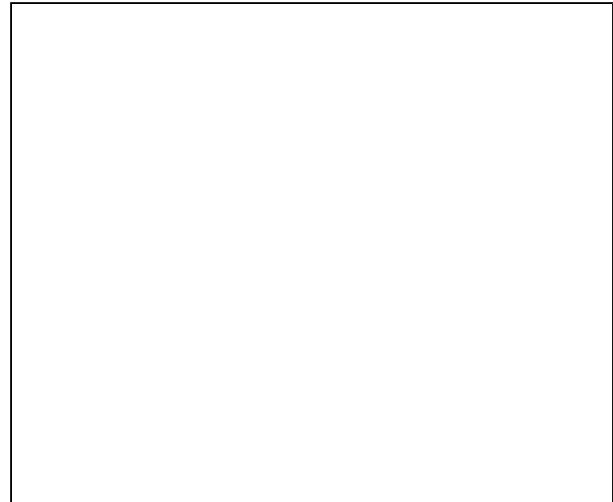
I'm very anxious and concerned about the upcoming gubernatorial election. But I won't be endorsing.

We have maintained strict adherence to the issue and not to the person. The issue is going to be here long after the person.

I don't think a good citizen is ever done with politics.

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