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Sr. Kostielney, Michigan Catholic Conference president/CEO, retires

by Robert Delaney of The Michigan Catholic
 Published March 12, 2010

DETROIT – Retiring after 37 years with the [Michigan Catholic Conference](#), the last 16 as its president and chief executive officer, Mercy Sr. Monica Kostielney can look back on a career of promoting the social teaching of the Catholic Church in the public square.

Archbishop Allen Vigneron, who chairs the MCC's board of directors, praised Sr. Kostielney for dedicated her vocation "to the dignity of human life, educational justice and concern for the poor among us."

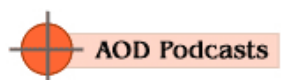
"As president and chief executive officer, Sr. Monica has led the Michigan Catholic Conference with tremendous vigor and fidelity, guiding the conference to heights never before witnessed in the history of the organization," Archbishop Vigneron added. The MCC announced the board's acceptance of Sr. Kostielney's resignation March 3.

She spoke of the importance of making the Church's voice heard in public life during a telephone interview last Friday. "The Church has a moral obligation to speak and to teach its truth. For example, it is the only institution with an exclusive mission to protect life from conception to natural death," said Sr. Kostielney, 72.

And while there is more to the Church's social teaching than the life issue, "it undergirds the foundation and core from which all other issues flow," she continued.

As the public policy voice of all seven Michigan dioceses, the Lansing-based MCC presents the Catholic viewpoint on legislative issues both to elected officials and to the wider public. It has coordinated or been a key player in a number of statewide ballot issue campaigns – with a record of both victories and defeats.

Sr. Kostielney worked with the MCC on one of its successful campaigns even before she joined the MCC staff in 1973 as its public affairs assistant for education. "It was 1972 and the abortion issue was on the ballot here in Michigan. We entered the campaign late and were far





behind in the polls, but successfully turned it around – only to have it all undone by the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision on Jan. 22, 1973," she recounted.

But a later ballot campaign in the 1980s successfully banned state-funding for abortion in Michigan. In the 1990s, the MCC successfully led an interfaith coalition against legalizing assisted suicide.

The conference was unsuccessful, however, in its efforts to convince Michigan voters to approve school vouchers, and was unable to persuade them to reject anti-affirmative action and pro-embryonic stem cell research measures.

Sr. Kostielney said she would probably count the lack of success on education-related ballot initiatives as her greatest regret. "Until we can achieve some educational justice for our children, we will continue to have a situation that hurts our society," she said.

She attributed the loss on the embryonic stem cell ballot issue largely to the complexity of the issue, making it difficult to convey the message that the Church is not opposed to all forms of stem-cell research, but only to that which destroys human life.

"It is very hard to make distinctions that are so important in sound bites or a 60-second commercial," Sr. Kostielney remarked.

But the MCC has also had successes that did not involve statewide ballot drives, one of those being the very fact that efforts to bring back capital punishment in Michigan never made it as far as the ballot.

She also pointed to the state Legislature's removal of sales tax on food and drugs, its approval of an earned-income tax credit at the state level, and also that Michigan's durable power of attorney law incorporated changes requested by the MCC.

Through its issues papers distributed to parishes across Michigan, the MCC has also helped Catholics understand how Church teaching applies to public policy.

"Right now, we're engaged pretty heavily in the area of health care," she said.

Sr. Kostielney said her work for the MCC has been a blessing in her life. "Besides having to depend very heavily on the Holy Spirit to guide me in how best to uphold the dignity of every human being, it has enabled me – as a Sister of Mercy – to work for the elimination of sickness and poverty," she said.

"We know God through people, and so, people become so important. If we truly love God, then we will love his people," Sr. Kostielney added.

A native of Detroit who grew up in [St. Francis d'Assisi Parish](#) on the city's west side, Sr. Kostielney attended [Mercy High School](#) and then went on to earn her bachelor's degree from Mercy College, both then in Detroit. She went on to earn master's degrees from the University of Detroit.

She did further post-graduate study at Teachers College of Columbia University, New York.

A committee to be appointed by the MCC board will oversee a national search for Sr. Kostielney's successor, with an announcement expected in August. She will continue to serve until then, and probably through the end of the year to help with the transition.

But after that, she plans an educational sabbatical and a period of discernment "to understand what it is I'm called to do at this phase of my life."

"It's been a blest, blest life. Every moment has been a gift. So, I have to think about how I can understand the gifts I have received and how I can give back to God's people," Sr. Kostielney added.



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