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SR. MONICA LAMENTS HURRIED GOVERNANCE

Early in her career as a top executive with Michigan Catholic Conference, Sr. Monica Kostielney went to the aide of one of the sponsors of legislation to allow for a durable power of attorney, which allows terminally ill people to designate someone else to handle life and death decisions, and said her organization had 43 separate objections to the legislation.

"And he said, 'Well, that's doable, let's sit down and work that out,'" she said. It was the start of a process that allowed for pioneering legislation in Michigan, and it is a process that largely no longer exists in government.

Retiring from the Catholic Conference on Friday after 38 years, Sr. Kostielney said in an interview with Gongwer News Service that society and government have changed dramatically in the last decades. There is no time to hold even a conversation, to search out meanings and nuances and consider all the various points in any issue, even the most simple seeming issue.

No matter the issue, "you need a lot of background, which legislators don't always have," she said. Part of that is due to term limits, which have been in place since 1992, but she also said that she did not want to harp on term limits.



Sister Monica Kostielney's last day as head of the Michigan Catholic Conference was Friday.

Much of the problem stems from the sense that everyone is in a terrible hurry and uninterested in reflection.

Go back to the issue of the medical decision, the ability of the legislators and their aides to work out the different issues, to develop the knowledge base (which often involves complicated reading) and to consider all the potential problems, from the standpoint of the doctors, the nurses, the families, as well as the patients.

Much of that understanding comes "from the ability to converse. You don't have to so much with legislators today. They don't have the time, they're always in a hurry," she said.

Succeeding Sr. Kostielney as head of the Michigan Catholic Conference is Paul Long, the conference's longtime vice president for public policy.

While she is retiring, Sr. Kostielney hopes to become involved in education, which is how she came to work for Catholic Conference. A native of the west side of Detroit, a graduate of both Mercy College and the University of Detroit (the schools have since combined), and joining the Sisters of Mercy, Sr. Kostielney was teaching in Grand Rapids when her superintendent asked her to get the other teachers together for a presentation. At that presentation, Ed Farhat, the then executive director of the Catholic Conference, talked about a ballot issue to legalize abortion in Michigan.

"In a moment of clarity I'd never had before or since, I wanted to help," she said. So that summer and fall of

1972 she worked on the issue, which had seemed in opinion polls to win in a landslide, but which then lost in a landslide.

Asked what were the biggest wins and losses of her career, Sr. Kostielney said the defeat of the abortion issue was the biggest victory and passage of a proposal in 2008 to allow research using embryonic stem cells the biggest defeat. The church was not opposed to the use of stem cells so long as they were not embryonic stem cells, which the church views as destroying human life.

Sr. Kostielney has been president and CEO of the conference since 1994, having been executive vice president for 11 years before that. In that position, she headed one of the few special interests that approaches government and public service from a religious perspective.

She said it allowed her a "beautiful blending of my foundation with my ministry." In her order she took a vow to serve the poor, but, while working in that, she also said, "We strongly believe we are made in the image and likeness of God and because of that we have to respect each other."

And respecting each other means "considering the whole range of what an individual is," she said.

That thinking goes into the overall complexity of issues, and how ideally individuals should look at all the different factors involved. For example, building the Detroit River International Crossing is not just a matter of money, but of overall transportation needs, coordination with another sovereign nation, environmental and community effects, just to name a few implications, she said.

Being the representative of a religious organization also means she can approach government and public service openly from the concept of love. Love is the purpose for everything, she said. "Without love, nothing is done," she said, and love acts as the basis of passion which helps drive activity. "Without passion, you dry up," she said.

Though she said of all the divine virtues, probably the one most difficult to exercise was forgiveness. She said she wondered about that to her staff once, and they came back saying, "Well, you're not married."

And she said the parable of the prodigal son, which deals directly with forgiveness and the difficulty of accepting forgiveness, is the basis of social justice.

As the public and legislators get pushed more to the extreme, the public and government is missing balance. "Balance is what we really need. At the core of this disaster, we don't have any consensus on anything in this society," she said. "If I were to describe society, one accurate statement would be that everyone doesn't like somebody. We are even protesting protestors."

Society and government has a lost a sense of who is responsible for what, she said. Looking at traditional Amish culture, the hierarchy of responsibility is that a person must watch over the family, then their neighbors, then the church, then the community, then the government. But now, attitudes have devolved that a person is solely responsible for himself or herself and then the question is at what stage government is involved.

All aspects of life are also viewed as commodities, she said. At a forum she attended once, a person said a person's health care coverage had to be viewed in light of what the person could afford. But health care should be a right of life, she said, which has to take into consideration factors such as what role government plays in ensuring that right and helping pay for it and in helping deal with elements that could control health care costs such as violence and addictions.

She also said that society has become less willing to speak directly about some issues. For example, she said people were unwilling to speak of greed, but greed is a factor in how decisions are made.

The desire for things, not just tangible things, has thrown off society's balance and order. Sr. Kostielney

said she hears how things are out of order, for example, when she hears young people saying they want a job in a particular city, with all their friends, at a particular wage, with particular benefits, and that desire does not reflect overall reality or a willingness to accept the limits of choice.

And she returned again and again to the idea of developing greater education. Education is the "one true safety net" that can help all persons.

Asked what she would advise incoming legislators to read to help them prepare for government service, she said the Constitution and a new volume of letters by the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan ("Daniel Patrick Moynihan; A Portrait In Letters Of An American Visionary").

As she leaves, she said she would be taking home a whole pile of little treasures, including a LeBron James bobblehead (which she was given, she said, because "he may be better than that player who's in the Nike Ads." Told it was Michael Jordan, she said, "I have a casual interest in sports.")

And she said she will have to adjust to not coming into downtown Lansing during the workweek. She has a delivery call scheduled for her house next week and was trying to think of whom she could have stay at her house for the call, when she realized she would be home.

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124 West Allegan Street, Suite 1200, Lansing, Michigan, 48933

Phone: 517.482.3500 **Fax:** 517.482.4367 **Email:** gongwer@gongwer.com