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Halftime at the Virginia General Assembly

At the beginning of each year, the members of the Virginia General Assembly, both the Delegates from the House and the Senators, meet to pass new laws and to amend old ones for the benefit of the Commonwealth. Their deliberations should center on the common good. Their concerns should not be focused on self-interest groups or on the particular concerns of individuals with influence.

In one way or another, the General Assembly members wrestle with the biennial state budget every year. Each year, the General Assembly alternates between long sessions of 60 days and short sessions of 45 days. Major budget decisions occur during the long sessions, on even-numbered years. This year, 2001, the General Assembly is in a short session and its members are fine-tuning budget decisions from last year with final budget amendments.

It is not my purpose to appraise all the aspects of this year's session because the General Assembly is only at the halfway point in its short session. Right now bills that have passed in one chamber, the House or the Senate, are "crossing over" to the other chamber where they will be passed, amended or rejected. Usually, a joint committee is appointed to reconcile differences in similar bills that are passed by both chambers.

Every year, especially in the short session, the legislators are faced with an avalanche of bills and resolutions. This turns their work into a frenzy of activity. This year, for instance, 2,871 bills and 900 resolutions were submitted to the House of Delegates. Another 1,425 bills and 529 resolutions were submitted to the Senate. The experience can be nightmarish. There are too many bills and resolutions and too little time to deal with them. Legislators spend long hours, fighting off fatigue and work overload, in trying their best to make just decisions.

The budget and the car tax cut, which have dominated the headlines, are casting a cloud over the entire session this year. In order to fund the car tax cut (with a proposal this time to increase the cut from 47.5 percent to 70 percent), the administration will have to make extensive and substantial cuts to the budget. This will greatly reduce funding for human services especially in terms of health, education, mental health and social services. At the halfway point, Senators have voted to cut the car tax only by 50 percent instead of the 70 percent proposed by Governor Gilmore. The Delegates, on the other hand, are supporting the 70 percent cut. Obviously, there is going to be much wrangling in the days ahead in order to reconcile the differences.

There have been encouraging developments from this year's Assembly regarding the protection of life. Our diocese, along with the Virginia Society for Human Life, has supported *informed consent legislation*. This legislation consists of bills that would require abortion counselors to make information on alternatives to abortion available to their clients. The resulting laws would also mandate a reflection period prior to an abortion. Happily, these bills have passed in both the House and the Senate respectively. I believe that such bills are pro-woman. Despite contrary claims by some groups, these laws will benefit those many women who feel pressured into an abortion or who feel a sense of guilt or regret after an abortion. Thankfully, the governor has indicated that he is willing to sign such legislation into effect.

The protection of life did not fare well, however, with the Assembly's handling of capital punishment. Unfortunately, attempts at a moratorium on capital punishment were not successful this year. I testified before a Senate subcommittee to advocate a moratorium on the death penalty in the Commonwealth. I believe a moratorium is necessary because we need ample time to study whether the death penalty is necessary any longer, to look at how it is administered and to determine if it even accomplishes its goals. We need to consider seriously the effective alternatives to capital punishment that are now available in Virginia, particularly life imprisonment without parole. We also need to investigate thoroughly the faulty and discriminatory way in which the death penalty is administered here in the Commonwealth.

Thankfully, though, there were two modest improvements made to the judicial process that relate to the death penalty. They involve, first of all, allowing the retention of evidence in capital cases. There

is also an exception to the 21-day rule that extends the time for allowing human biological evidence in felony cases. As it exists now, the 21-day rule totally prevents the presentation of any new evidence 21 days after sentencing.

Our diocese, under the leadership of Dr. Steve Colecchi, supported an amendment to provide rental assistance to poor working families. Unfortunately, the House acted by recommending only a small amount of funding for this vital human need. We had more success in actively opposing three bills that tried to prevent localities from enacting their own living wage ordinances. Thankfully, two of those bills failed in committee. The third passed in the House by only a small margin, with a vote of 51 to 48. Hopefully it too will fail in the Senate.

We also supported budget amendments to increase welfare benefits for Virginia's poor children. Sadly, because of the fight over the car tax cut, bills proposed to help the poor have become problematic. The poor too often seem to get only what is left over in the budget process. If, however, we believe in what the word Commonwealth really means, the poor deserve their rightful share – and because we believe in the values of the Gospel, they should always have a preferential option in our budget considerations.

I firmly believe that the diocese, while never playing partisan politics, should be actively involved in the political process. This is where decisions are made that directly affect the lives of people. We, as believers, should always protect human life – on all levels. We should promote human dignity and preserve God's creation. We must be a voice for the underprivileged and those who have no voice in the legislative process.

I applaud the involvement of our legislative advocates, both in our own diocese and from the Diocese of Arlington. I respect and support the work of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy under the direction of Rev. Fletcher Lowe, an Episcopal priest and good friend. I also encourage all the people of the diocese to be informed about legislative issues. I urge them to become involved, to express their values to our legislators and to help ensure that our laws actually serve people, especially those most in need. In this way we can be more than just good citizens– we can truly be “faithful citizens”.

+ Walter F. Sullivan
Bishop of Richmond