

Catholic Explorer

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St. Gregory smiles on long time ally of church

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By KATHRYNNE SKONICKI

ADDISON—There was little fanfare June 1 in Addison when Bishop Joseph L. Imesch entered the district office of U.S. Congressman Henry Hyde, R-Ill. Unlike the swarm of media that regularly documents Hyde’s moves in the nation’s capital, there was only one reporter/photographer present and ready to record the event. There was no pomp and circumstance with processions and formal speeches, just the handful of employees dutifully stationed at their desks.

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The legislator stayed seated behind his desk filled with stacks of papers, books and mementos from 32 years of service in the U. S. House of Representatives and eight years in the Illinois legislature. The proud Catholic easily pointed out items of interest to the bishop. A CD collection of Father John Caropi, a member of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, was placed on top of one of the stacks. Hyde pulled out from within the heap of papers cherished photos of his most recent trip to the Vatican; he had met Pope John Paul II three times. The 8- by 10-inch photographs captured Hyde shaking hands with Pope Benedict XVI April 19, 2006, the one-year anniversary of his election as pope. Meanwhile, a bronze bust of St. Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, held a position of prominence on his windowsill.

After a brief discussion about Hyde’s recent interaction with the pope, Bishop Imesch bestowed a papal honor upon Hyde, admittance into the papal Order of Saint Gregory. Bishop Imesch announced, “I just want to thank you for your staunch defense of life through some very, very difficult times. This is not the environment to speak up for pro-life. But you have been a consistent, steady voice for life and the church owes you a great deal for that.”

At the request of Bishop Imesch, Hyde's name was submitted to Pope Benedict XVI for membership into the Order of Saint Gregory, which does not impose any special obligations. The papal award is bestowed upon an individual who exhibits particularly admirable service to the church. Bishop Imesch gave Hyde a diploma, written in Latin, declaring his knighthood and bearing the signature and seal of the Vatican's Secretary of State.

Honored by the award, Hyde responded by repeating Scriptural words of inspiration to him. Hyde said, "When you have done all you have been commanded, say I am an unworthy servant. I've only done my duty."

The papal honor is one of many Hyde has received for his long-time fight for life. Dating back to 1976, the freshman representative introduced and successfully persuaded his colleagues to pass the Hyde Amendment to the Health and Human Services Appropriations Act, which restricted the federal government from funding abortions. He continued to recruit others in honoring life on the House floor and beyond. In 1985, he authored a book, "For Every Idle Silence," which exhibited his pro-life views again. Even more recently, he raised his voice in the long debate about the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act and was present in 2003 when President Bush signed it into law.

"You've been a loud and clear voice for the unborn. The church needs to show their appreciation to you for that leadership. It wasn't easy. You stood alone for a long time," added Bishop Imesch before extending a special blessing to Hyde and departing.

With his hand close to a blue coffee mug inscribed with the words, "God Bless America," Hyde discussed with the Catholic Explorer how he has been able to be true to his faith while maintaining a separation between church and state.

He said, "I think the purpose of religion is to provide guidance and to provide a channel over which we learn what God wants us to do and how God wants us to live. I think it's right and proper to distinguish between those things that are strictly religious in nature and those things that are secular." He continued, "And I don't think there's any real trouble in making a distinction, but I'm careful to observe, to be informed by my religion. I have little use for those who claim to be Catholics, but in the next breath they explain why they are not governed by any Catholic teaching. I think you can be both without any embarrassing conflict."

The parishioner of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bensenville expressed gratitude to the faith community that has been supportive of his legislative initiatives. He also said he appreciated “the feeling you’re in a good Catholic Church when you go to Mass at St. Charles.”

Hyde has faithfully been part of the debate regarding so many of the country’s decisions over the last three decades. While the Republican was chairing the nation’s international relations committee, the United States committed to investing over \$15 billion to address the worldwide pandemic of HIV/AIDS and established an aid program to poor countries called the Millennium Challenge. As a member of the judiciary committee, Hyde garnered support for President Bill Clinton’s assault weapons ban in 1994. Hyde also became a central character in American history in 1998-1999 when he introduced legislation to investigate the case for the impeachment of President Clinton. He led the hearings as chairman of the judiciary committee.

Though he has set forth a solid foundation, there is still much work to be done by his successors—addressing concerns about military hospitals performing abortions, maintaining the sanctity of marriage and halting embryonic stem cell research. But those are challenges for men and women with younger legs, stronger voices and more energy. For now, the soon-to-be retiree said he’s just going to take a break for a while and enjoy his retirement.