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Editorial: Put concrete realities on US bishops' agenda

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Fall bishops' meeting 2013
Editorial

Anyone looking at the published agenda of the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (see story [1]) would say that an efficient, business-like organization could deal with that in half a day. The published agenda is beyond prosaic: approval of some liturgical translations, an election of officers, some committee reports, and a "presentation for a proposal to develop a formal statement on pornography." (Spoiler alert: They are against porn.)

There is, it seems, very little action in the bishops' action items.

The bishops should quickly deal with this old agenda, and then address the central question facing them: What kind of conference do they want to be?

Pope Francis has been clear about what he expects of bishops: He has condemned in no uncertain terms clericalism and careerism. One of his earliest statements was that priests -- and by extension bishops -- should "be shepherds with the smell of sheep" on them. In late October, ordaining two archbishops, Francis told them: "Keep in mind that you were selected to serve, not to dominate."

Francis has been even more explicit about what he expects from bishops and their national conferences. In his July 27 address to the Brazilian bishops [2] and his address the next day to the leadership of the Latin American Episcopal Conference [3], he laid out his vision and agenda. We would highlight these points:

- "Central bureaucracy is not sufficient; there is also a need for increased collegiality and solidarity." What is needed is "not unanimity, but true unity in the richness of diversity."
- "Let us not reduce the involvement of women in the church, but instead promote their active role in the ecclesial community. By losing women, the church risks becoming sterile."
- Do diocesan and parish councils, "whether pastoral or financial, provide real opportunities for laypeople to participate in pastoral consultation, organization and planning?"
- Do we give the laity "the freedom to continue discerning, in a way befitting their growth as disciples, the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them? Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate them or infantilize them?"

As in so many of his homilies and public addresses, Francis in Brazil spoke of the power of mercy: "Without mercy, we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of 'wounded' persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love."

In short, Francis wants a church willing to accompany, listen to and dialogue with all people in the church, outside the church, and those who have left the church.

That's a good foundation upon which our bishops can build their deliberations this month. But, in the spirit of

Francis, we would challenge them to move from a disembodied intellectualism into the concrete realities the church must face today. We would suggest the following as starters:

- Resolve their dispute with President Barack Obama over the Health and Human Services contraceptive mandate. They need to embrace the exemptions and accommodations that Catholic colleges and hospitals say are workable and abandon their support of exemptions for for-profit employers, a fight they never should have picked in the first place. This dispute has disrupted too much critical business of the bishops' conference. The Affordable Care Act is the closest we have gotten to a health system that cares for all citizens. Catholic hospitals and Catholic Charities should be among the leaders in signing people up for coverage, and the bishops should be directing their staff to find ways to make the program better.
- Ditch their unrelentingly harsh criticism of same-sex marriage. In state legislatures, courtrooms and polling places, they have lost the civil battle over same-sex marriage. The bishops need a realistic pastoral plan to address marriage equality that honors the civil law and their Catholic faithful.
- Censure bishops who have violated the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. Among the bishops are at least three active members who have seriously violated the Dallas Charter: Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., John Myers of Newark, N.J., and John Nienstedt of St. Paul-Minneapolis. The majority of church leadership are doing a credible job protecting children and holding themselves accountable. Some bishops and chancery personnel continue to obstruct investigations and cover up crimes. They must be dealt with publicly.
- Stand with the poor. The closure of the government last month and the once again forestalled fight over the federal budget are manifestations of a deeper debate about what the government should do for its citizens and where a nation should invest its riches. We fear that poor people and the near-poor have no advocates in that debate. Two years ago, the bishops, working with a coalition of liked-minded organizations, built a "Circle of Protection" and successfully defended the most basic social safety net. We urge them to move forward with that same coalition to build an active movement that insists on investment in people. Jobs, health care and education should be their rallying call.

We are asking the bishops to drop their self-referential, inward-looking agenda and -- in the spirit of Francis -- take the Gospel into the streets. We'd like to meet our bishops on the periphery.

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