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New USCCB president shifts message, asks to 'warm hearts'

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 12, 2013 NCR Today
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Hours after his election as the next president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz began notably shifting the conference's tone, saying he wants to speak for the "voiceless and vulnerable" and sees himself primarily as a pastor.

Kurtz, the archbishop of Louisville, Ky., spoke Tuesday afternoon during a press conference at the bishops' meeting. The current vice president of the conference, Kurtz was elected Tuesday [1] morning to be their next president by a 53 percent majority.

Mentioning an address given [2] to the bishops Monday by the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S, Kurtz said the message of Pope Francis to bishops is "primarily a call to be a pastor."

Referencing that address from Archbishop Carlo Viganò, Kurtz said something that will guide his time as leader of the conference is the question: ?How can we warm hearts and heal wounds??

Kurtz will formally take up his role with the on Thursday, when New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan's tenure expires.

Dolan's three years as the leader of the conference were marked by a particular focus on the bishops' fight against the Obama administration's implementation of the health care law, which the cardinal repeatedly said did not leave enough room for Catholic employers from providing contraceptive services.

Responding to a question on whether he will seek to improve the bishops' relationship with the Obama administration, Kurtz said that "faith enriches public life."

"So, naturally there is a great desire ... to have a good and healthy relationship with the administration, as well as with congress," he said.

?Our efforts to speak on behalf of the voiceless and vulnerable puts us in a position to potentially do great good," said Kurtz, mentioning that he wants to focus on "having a robust and a common sense religious liberty" but also wants to work on immigration reform and poverty.

Also speaking at the press conference was Galveston-Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, who was elected as the bishops' new vice president on Tuesday. He also addressed immigration reform, saying the bishops "hope to be able to be a catalyst and we?re constantly getting our people together on this."

Asked about Francis' call for the church to be a "church for the poor," Kurtz said he thinks the U.S. bishops are "very much in solidarity with Pope Francis on that." The archbishop pointed to the work of bishops' committees on economic issues and said there is a "tremendous amount of work in social change that already is going on.?

?Can we do more?" he asked. "Of course we can. There?s no question about that.?

While the bishops may have not issued a pastoral statement on the economy, DiNardo said, what they are doing in their dioceses is "consistent and persistent."

The president-elect also said that the "most important" time he had in his life were 12 years he served as a pastor in the diocese of Allentown, Pa.

A native of Pennsylvania, Kurtz comes from a background in social work and provision of social services. The archbishop led the Allentown diocese's social service agency for a decade and was the diocese's coordinator for health affairs for seven years before being called to the episcopate in 1999.

He first served as bishop of Knoxville, Tenn., before becoming Louisville's archbishop in 2007.

One of the questions at the press conference Tuesday came from Martha Hennessy, a writer for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper who is also the grand-daughter of the movement's co-founder Dorothy Day.

She asked if bishops would consider making a public statement on the amount of money the U.S. spends per week on its military budget.

?The church, I think, has been in the leadership in terms of our efforts with regard to peacemaking," Kurtz replied. "There has been a steady stream of testimony in Congress, specifically talking about the dangers of increased use of funding for armament.?

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