News



Prelates vote June 14 during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Brian Roewe

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Editor's note: *This story was been updated throughout June 15, 10:15 a.m. CDT, with additional remarks made by bishops during the June 14 discussion on the "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" document.*

After nearly 90 minutes of fraternal debate about the future of their quadrennial voter guide, the U.S. bishops opted to supplement rather than revise or replace the current document, resisting a push from a group of bishops who viewed the current version as outdated in light of "a radically different moment" brought by the presidency of Donald Trump.

The bishops voted 144 to 41, with two abstentions, to complement the current edition of "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" with a short letter and videos and other resources aimed at inspiring prayer and action in public life. An amendment added to the proposal directs the supplemental material to apply the teaching of Pope Francis to present times.

While much of the floor discussion during the bishops' annual spring meeting here centered on whether a new or revised statement was warranted, it was unclear the level of enthusiasm among the full body for such edits. A late-minute amendment appeared to leave open the door for possible future adjustments.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, who as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops shepherded the robust discussion, said the morning's vote was the beginning, rather than last word on the future of "Faithful Citizenship."

"This is going to be subject to much further livelier debate, I think, as we move along," he said.

The U.S. bishops have been issuing "Faithful Citizenship" documents, reflecting on election issues, every four years since 1976. The current document was crafted in

2007; a new introduction for it was written in 2011 and some revisions made in 2015.

The proposed supplemental elements were put forth by a working group of chairs of a dozen bishop committees, led by Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In introducing their proposal, Gomez said their goal was to increase the document's influence and reach more Catholics. He said the working group viewed it as having "lasting value" as a resource for state Catholic conferences, priests and fellow bishops, but that the text was "too long and not particularly accessible or practical in helping the ordinary faithful individuals."

"In the process of learn, pray, act, 'Faithful Citizenship' does a good job of helping our people to learn," he said. "So the task for us is to motivate the faithful to pray and to act."

Once the proposal opened to debate, disagreement broke out about whether the document, as it stood, still held relevance absent revisions in light of the teachings of Francis and the country's present political climate.

While his name was never said, the agenda of the Trump administration was acutely in the mind of bishops pushing for a new or heavily modified "Faithful Citizenship" document.

One by one, they took to the microphone to make their case why simply reissuing "Faithful Citizenship" would miss the mark.

"I think it would be a missed opportunity and a big mistake not to move forward with an entirely new document," said Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, who led off the floor discussion saying he would vote against the proposal.

A new document is necessary, he said, in order to integrate the body of teachings from Francis — highlighting the issues of climate change, poverty and immigration — into the bishops' own teachings and guidance. Cupich also said a new document would allow an opportunity for bishops to model how public discourse over issues of disagreement should play out during this time of political polarization.

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Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, argued there is a "different context that we find ourselves in after the last national election."

"Even though our teachings don't change, the context changes and the priority of issues change," he said.

Stowe referenced the U.S. withdrawals from the Paris Agreement on climate change and Iran nuclear deal, and the increased focus on issues of gun control and immigration. The latter two issues he noted are important to young people.

"I think if the church doesn't have something to say about those issues, we're missing a very important opportunity, especially if we want to reach out to youth and incorporate them more fully in the life of the church," Stowe said.

"There's not much in the document about Pope Francis," said Bishop Michael Warfel, adding that in his Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Montana, Faithful Citizenship is viewed as stale.

San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy pressed his fellow bishops that the "radically different moment" the country finds itself in requires from them a comprehensive statement "from the whole of the body, reflecting upon the signs of the times that we're in."

"We are living in a moment in which we witness the greatest assault upon the rights of immigrant people of the past 50 years. We live in a nation with racial and geographic and regional divides in which people of color feel victimized by institutional prejudice and violence and many white, working-class men and women feel dispossessed. We live in a time in which children are afraid to go to school

because they may be killed. We live in a time in which we have the great challenge of bringing to the millennial generation an understanding that the instrumentalization of human life, at the beginning of life and at the end, is unacceptable and why laws should touch upon that," he said.

"And yet, we see our institutions, legal and political, being distorted and atrophy. We need to speak to these questions and we need to speak as a collective body of bishops."

McElroy said that "Faithful Citizenship" in its current form does not reflect Francis' recent apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* ("Rejoice and Be Glad") and that stated issues such as poverty, migration and the environment are not secondary but among "primary issues of claim upon the conscience of believers in public policy."

More fundamentally, he said, the document has nothing to say about present moments "that traumatize us as a country.

"Regarding the rescission of DACA, it is silent. Regarding Charlottesville, silent. Parkland, silent. 'Faithful Citizenship' of 2015 cannot be our response to the moment we are living in. It cannot engage with the signs of the times, it can only engage with the signs of the past and we should not move it forward," McElroy said.

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In response to calls for updating the document, Gomez and other members of the working group argued the document would only become longer and take more time to produce. The Los Angeles archbishop referred to a 2011 CARA study that found 16 percent of adult U.S. Catholics had heard of "Faithful Citizenship."

Issuing videos from the current text, they said, could reach a new segment of Catholics who haven't yet read it.

"We very much want to reflect this great Franciscan shift in emphasis," said Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron, a member of the working group as chair of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis. "Our fear is that we have to retain a lot of the things in 'Faithful Citizenship,' which are very well presented, well argued, we'd just be making a much longer document."

Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey — who joined in suggesting *Gaudete et Exsultate* alone is reason enough for a new document — suggested that perhaps a new process was necessary, since the current one delays the conference's ability to make "prompt and thorough and reflective responses" to what's happening in the public square.

"Here, we're a year and a half out from the elections, and we're saying we don't have enough time. I think that the process at least has to be questioned. And if this is the best process, we'll stick with it. But maybe there's a better way of doing things," Tobin said.

A number of bishops took to the floor to voice support for packaging the same "Faithful Citizenship" in new, more accessible forms. Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, noted on his flight to the meeting he saw few fellow passengers, if any, reading; rather, most were staring at some type of video screen. He advocated for a series of videos, with others suggesting short lengths for maximum reach.

Still, other bishops pushed back, saying that reissuing the same message, regardless of medium, would fall short, and not meet its stated goals of articulating to Catholics that faith comes prior to political leanings, the call to be faithful citizens at all times and not just during elections, and the need for respectful, civil discourse.

Bishop John Michael Botean, head of the Romanian Catholic Eparchy of St. George in Canton, Ohio, said the bishops have developed a reputation of taking too long to address issues facing the country.

"I think what we are running the risk of right now is appearing that we don't care or aren't paying attention," he said, suggesting that it may be time for "Faithful Citizenship" to "pass into the memory of the documents" of the conference and start anew, even if it takes some time.

Botean expressed reservations that a "yes" vote on the proposal would be viewed outside the conference as comfort with the status quo in the country.

"I think the idea that we should be satisfied with 'Faithful Citizenship' as it is, or give that impression even if we're not, it's a dangerous public statement to make," he said.

Bishop Robert Coerver of Lubbock, Texas, joined in expressing concern about revising and reissuing documents that are more than a decade old, referring to "Faithful Citizenship" as well as the Charter for the Protection of Young People and liturgical documents that the bishops approved revisions earlier in the day.

"I know the work is hard to start fresh, but I really am concerned if we keep publishing documents that have copyright 2002, 2015 and now 2018. And a lot of the people that are going to be reading them were barely born when the document was first written," he said.

Baltimore Archbishop William Lori commented that it was "a very tall challenge" to produce a "Faithful Citizenship" that both represents a kind of compendium of the bishops' teachings, used by conferences and clergy, while also being inspirational to the wider church.

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Las Vegas Bishop George Thomas in his time used an adage — "If I had taken more time, I would have written a shorter letter" — to advocate for brevity in a new "user-friendly letter" that models Francis in both substance (connecting "liturgy and justice") and style (preferring "dialogue over diatribe").

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, New York, who worked on the original "Faithful Citizenship," said while revisions could be made, it was as much a question of resources and distribution. He asked if the bishops would air any produced videos on networks such as CNN or FOX News to ensure people hear what they have to say.

"If we want to form consciences, how are consciences formed today? Not by us, but by the media. By what they see in the public forum," he said.

As the debate moved forward, questions of voting process arose. Several bishops asked whether the videos would be viewed as statements from the conference, and

if so, then require a two-thirds vote for passage rather than a simple majority.

At one point, amendments were proposed to allow for revisions, to scrap "Faithful Citizenship" entirely from the vote they were considering, and to table the motion until their November meeting.

"I think we're so divided right now, and we're unclear on so many places where we want to go," Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont said as he moved to table the vote.

The motion was defeated in a vote, while the amendment to remove "Faithful Citizenship" was rejected by the working group. One amendment accepted edited the proposal from stating "rather than revise or replace" to simply "rather than to replace," apparently leaving an opening for revisions at some point. A clause was also added stating the new elements for "Faithful Citizenship" would "apply the teachings of Pope Francis to our day."

Repeating his comments from the onset of the conversation, DiNardo said the debate that followed indicated this was only the beginning of the process. "And rightfully so, since the points of view of the brothers are intensely held, and logically held, I might add, on all sides."

A final vote on a finished product wouldn't be held until November 2019, he said.

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Editor's Note: *A previous version of this report misstated the number of abstentions in the vote.*

A version of this story appeared in the **June 29-July 12, 2018** print issue under the headline: Some bishops push for radical changes in light of political climate.