News



For more than 38 years, Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa has preached to the pope and top officials of the Roman Curia. In early January, he will lead the weeklong retreat of the U.S. bishops. He is pictured in a 2014 photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Several bishops who are planning to join a weeklong U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops retreat to start the New Year are trusting they'll return to their dioceses with a renewed sense of what it means to shepherd the faithful.

Such a reminder of their primary role, they said, should be good for the soul.

They also anticipate the days of prayer and reflection that were suggested by Pope Francis to bishops' conference leaders will inspire new ways to be present to abuse survivors and others yearning to be heard as they begin the crucial task of rebuilding people's trust in the hierarchy and the credibility of the institutional church.

"I'm hoping we kind of remind each other what this (ministry) is all about," said Bishop William Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, 51, who has been a bishop for 16 months. "It's got to be about service and a desire for holiness and, I'll throw this out there, purity."

The retreat, he told Catholic News Service, will be an opportunity for bishops to build "friendship and that trust in each other" as well.

Planned largely in response to last summer's revelations of sex abuse that reached the highest levels of the U.S. church, the Jan. 2-8 retreat at Mundelein Seminary near Chicago will be led by Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household.

Pope Francis proposed that Cantalamessa, 84, lead the retreat, which has as its theme "the mission of the apostles and their successors." Cantalamessa has preached to popes and top officials of the Roman Curia for more than 38 years.

Msgr. Jeffrey Burrill, associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told CNS that more than 200 bishops are expected to travel to Illinois. Active U.S. bishops number 271 and there are 185 retired bishops.

Bishop W. Shawn McKnight, 50, of Jefferson City, Missouri, described himself as "a huge fan" of Cantalamessa. Ordained a bishop last February, McKnight is expecting the respected preacher to deliver an inspiring message that will help as he continues to learn the full responsibilities of his role.

Although he's been in his position for a short time, McKnight has been outspoken in his call for church renewal, especially among bishops. He has spoken and written about the abuse scandal that erupted anew last summer, repeatedly calling for a deep examination of clericalism, which he feels spawned the current crisis.

"We as bishops in the United States need to do some soul-searching and really develop a strong sense of wanting to get at the bottom of the whole clerical sexual abuse problem," he explained to CNS. "Treating it simply as an issue of sexual immorality isn't going to solve anything. We have to recognize it as an abuse of power.

"In exercising our pastoral authority in the governance of the church, we have to look at new ways of spreading that power around a bit more, utilizing the laity as well as the other clergy," McKnight added. He said the retreat can be a starting point on the long path of restoring credibility and rebuilding trust among the faithful.

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Archbishop Paul Etienne, 59, of Anchorage, Alaska, sees the retreat as an avenue for the Holy Spirit to speak to bishops individually and corporately within the bishops' conference as they explore pastoral responses to the challenges the abuse crisis has posed.

The retreat, he said, will invite each bishop "to go much deeper in terms of personal reflection of where the Lord is wanting each of us to go in holiness and mirroring the Good Shepherd in our life."

Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, expects that Cantalamessa will approach the idea of a shepherd leading his flock both theologically and spiritually. "I suspect

that's Pope Francis' intention: to understand our role as bishops," he said.

"I think we (bishops) have to be as faithful as we can to the Gospel and the teachings of Christ and call some attention to the good that the church is doing. The crimes and the sins have been constantly in front of us and they're horrible and they need attention," added Stowe, 55, who became a bishop May 5, 2015.

"I hope the retreat will help us to lead the church to the point of healing and renewal."

Each bishop agreed that through a renewed commitment to their ministry, bishops overall will be better able to find new ways to respond to abuse survivors, some of whom continue to feel they have not been justly treated.

They also said they can seek ways to identify the positive responses taken by dioceses to address clergy abuse, most of which are not widely known.

Most importantly, they added, abuse survivors need to know the church cares.

"It starts with listening," Wack said. "It was something that was impressed on us in Baltimore during our fall meeting (in November). It was the presentations of the survivors that shows us the importance of listening. They said we have to listen. We even said that as a body of bishops. We have to listen to people's stories.



Archbishop Paul Etienne of Anchorage, Alaska, center, and New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, front right, listen to a speaker Nov. 14 at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"It's clear, and quite often that is not all that people want, but it's a great deal. They want to know that they're heard," Wack said.

Abuse survivors deserve to be heard, reiterated Etienne, Anchorage's archbishop since October 2016. Bishops must undertake "pastoral accompaniment with our victims and take the opportunity to express our deep sorrow and our deep desire to do what we can to help them."

At the same time, he continued, bishops must explain how the church overall and dioceses individually have made important strides in responding to clergy sex abuse.

Other bishops agreed, pointing to the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," the formation of lay diocesan review boards, victim assistance

offices and safe environment training, all of which have dramatically reduced reported abuse incidents since 2002.

McKnight said the church's response to abuse will require a greater integration of laypeople into "meaningful" church decision-making roles and that the prayer the bishops undertake in Illinois will help them discern how.

"It's very apparent to me because of our experience of clergy sexual abuse that the church cannot continue to operate as it has in the past. It will have to operate differently. And it's beginning to," McKnight said.

"I know there are some who have a concern that it might be an alteration of our traditional understanding of the role and authority and power of the bishop (to involve more laypeople)," he continued. "But I see it as a new way of exercising the episcopal office, not a change from the received tradition."

Whatever path the retreat takes, Stowe's hopes rest in the words of Cantalamessa.

"I'm praying it will be a valuable thing. I think the experience will be good."