News



Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput speaks from the floor during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore Nov. 11, 2019. (CNS /Bob Roller)



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Baltimore — November 11, 2019
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The U.S. bishops voted to approve the budget for 2020 for their conference headquarters in Washington but did not register sufficient numbers to determine passage of a proposed 3% increase in the diocesan assessment for 2021.

Both votes took place Nov. 11, the first day of their Nov. 11-13 fall general assembly in Baltimore.

The bishops approved a budget nearing $22.69 million for next year. Budget approval required a majority of bishops present and voting. The vote was 211-11, with one abstention.

The proposed 2020 budget projects a "marginal" surplus of $49,261, about 2% of the total, according to Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati, treasurer of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The figures include increases of 3.6% for policy and advocacy, 3.5% for the administrative offices, 2.7% for the general secretariat, 1.2% for the bishops' conference staff house in Washington, and 0.4% for pastoral ministries.

The biggest budget decreases come within the Migration and Refugee Services office, which relies on federal grants for much of its revenue. MRS operations "continue to be impacted by the very dynamic changes in the federal immigration and refugee policies and programs," Schnurr said in a message sent to bishops prior to the meeting

MRS administration is being cut $6.6 million "due primarily to the reduction in refugee arrivals which directly impacts pass-through funding to the dioceses for local administration and direct assistance to clients," Schnurr said. MRS' resettlement services office is being scaled back by $2.6 million "largely due to the closure of the Cuban-Haitian program by the end of 2019," he added. MRS' executive office is

cutting its budget $178,00 for 2020, and its special programs office will be down $53,000 from 2019 levels.

Overall the numbers of refugees admitted to the country who are helped by MRS "continue to track downward," Schnurr told his fellow bishops.

In fiscal year 2016, MRS settled about 4,200 refugees. In 2017, the number swelled to 7,800 refugees, but last year MRS resettled 6,350. And as of Sept 30 of this year, the number of refugees settled was 4,350.

"Staff remains vigilant and where possible, proactive" in pushing for higher federal intake numbers, he said.

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The conference's communications arm is projected to have a 0.1% decrease. "The communications budget represents the single largest budget within unrestricted funds," Schnurr said. "While it continues to have financial challenges," he added, "a study examining the viability of the communications operations and existing lines of revenue is very near completion."

Villa Stritch, owned and operated by the U.S. bishops' conference in Rome for visiting bishops, faces a 4.7% decrease.

Schnurr also recommended that the bishops approve a 3% assessment increase for 2021. Previous assessment increases of 3% were OK'd in 2017 and 2019, representing revenues of $339,000 and $349,000, respectively. The 2021 increase, if passed, is expected to generate close to $480,000.

Two-thirds of diocesan and eparchial bishops are required to vote yes for the assessment for it to pass. The vote was 111-55, with three abstentions. Bishops not at the meeting will be able to vote by email to see whether the two-thirds majority will be reached. There were 28 bishops not in attendance; 132 yes votes would be needed to OK the assessment.

"For the majority (62%) of dioceses, this will mean an average monthly increase of less than $150," Schnurr said.

"The assessment is not meant to fund new initiatives," he added. "The last time there was a special assessment was for the 2007 budget."

The bishops' conference also allows for "crisis response" expenses to be paid out of its general reserve fund. Schnurr said those expenses came to about $1.85 million for the 15 months between June 2018 and August 2019.

But Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia spoke against the assessment, saying he gives $257,000 to fund bishops; conference operations, and another $257,000 to the Vatican in accord to Canon 1271, which deals with diocesan support of the Vatican.

"I don't have the kind of money" to pay such assessments, Chaput said, adding that his archdiocese's reserves are not as large as those of the bishops' conference.

Schnurr said the interpretation that dioceses must pay an equal amount to the Vatican that they pay in support of their national bishops' conference is "a misunderstanding." He added the notion came up during an address to the U.S. bishops in the early 1990s from U.S. Cardinal Edmund Szoka, who at the time was president of the Prefecture for Economic Affairs of the Holy See, the Vatican's budget management office.

In the cardinal's remarks, "he said one interpretation of Canon 1271" was to pay equivalent amounts both to the national bishops' conference and the Vatican. But such a policy "was never voted on," said Schnurr, who was working at bishops; conference headquarters at the time. "That was only Cardinal Szoka's suggestion. It never went any further than that." The amount contributed to the Vatican he added, is "really left up to the individual diocese."

As to Chaput's point about the conference's reserves, Schnurr said the added expenses related to addressing clergy sex abuse – some $2.15 million – were able to paid for out of the reserves, allowing them to be built back up over time. Without it, "there would have been an immediate assessment" request of about 15% percent to pay for them, he added.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2019** feature series. View the full series.