Opinion
NCR Voices



Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston prepares to vote June 16 during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring plenary assembly in Orlando, Fla. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

June 19, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Someday, there will be new leadership at the U.S. bishops' conference, and they will have their work cut out for them. The good news is that not everything the conference produces is tuned to a culture war key. The bad news is that when the current leadership is not pursuing a culture war strategy, it is rallying around mediocrity.

Most of the attention focused on their decision to have the Doctrine Committee begin a revision of the Ethical and Religious Directives (ERDs) for Catholic health care institutions. Several prelates spoke about the need to consult with health care providers, a point I made before the meeting began.

I was also encouraged to hear Cardinal Joseph Tobin, of Newark, New Jersey, urge the committee to consult with representatives of the transgender community. Obviously, ERDs are professional documents, but no doctor launches a course of treatment without consulting with the patient, and those who genuinely experience gender dysphoria suffer greatly.

The part of the meeting that most depressed me was the discussion about the document on the Ongoing Formation of Priests. It was difficult to follow — the conference did not post the text online, as documents had been posted previously.

> The bishops' focus on the role of the faith in forming consciences, for faithful citizenship and much else, will benefit from the ongoing synodal process.
>
> Tweet this

What became clear is that bishops considered the document too long, and that they had received it so late, many had not had time to read it, let alone consider how it might be improved. Bishop Robert Coerver of Lubbock, Texas, one of the real stars

of the conference, raised concerns, as did Bishop Steven Biegler of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Biegler noted that the section on priestly identity did not even mention *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Vatican II document on the priesthood.

Bishops supporting the document had little more to say than that the drafters had worked really hard. "The document has been worked on for a couple of years. ... It's a good guide. I think it's too long. Vote for it!" was the best Galveston-Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo could muster by way of an argument. Alas, the body of bishops really do defer to the committees, and the text passed 144-24.

I was delighted to learn that the Committee on Priorities and Plans was withdrawing its draft to better integrate the adoption of a strategic plan with the results of the synodal consultations going on. This was a smart decision. Given the votes on other matters, I feared any strategic plan produced by the current leadership would be more or less tone deaf to the synodal process, as well as to the social magisterium of Pope Francis.

The most important discussion for readers of this column was held behind closed doors. The bishops decided not to discuss "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," their quadrennial document on voting, in open session. Last autumn, the bishops punted on drafting a new document despite the fact the current version was drafted for the 2008 election. That is to say, it was drafted without consideration of the social teaching of Pope Francis or of Pope Benedict XVI. Maybe it is better they held their debate last week in executive session. How could they have a productive discussion?

Advertisement

There is an answer to that last question: The bishops' focus on the role of the faith in forming consciences, for faithful citizenship and much else, will benefit from the ongoing synodal process. Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio, encouraged the bishops to recognize that the synodal process to which the Holy Father has called the entire church is undertaken at the instigation of the Holy Spirit and will only succeed if we all submit to the Spirit.

"As church leaders, we are very good at organizing programs and carrying out action plans," Pierre told the bishops. "And to be sure, such organization has produced

many positive results. But because the synodal path is less about a 'program' and more about a way of being church, it can be a challenge to us."

The bishops need to embrace that challenge.

As my NCR colleague Brian Fraga noted in his coverage, only 171 bishops were voting in Orlando, compared to 237 at the November plenary. The idea that they would bring up such a consequential matter as the ongoing formation of priests when 66 fewer bishops are in attendance warrants examination. Besides, the bishops are so divided on so many issues, they really could use their June meeting to try and find ways to overcome those divisions. Perhaps the bishops should think about synodality first and foremost in terms of themselves.

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2023** feature series. View the full series.