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Lay group asks bishops to tackle economic crisis

by John L. Allen Jr.

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The lone formal channel of input for lay Catholics to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recommended today that the bishops tackle the current economic crisis, addressing issues such as homelessness, health care, and unemployment.

"There's a strong consensus that [the crisis] touches and impacts all people and every Catholic in some way," said Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City, speaking on behalf of the National Advisory Council.

Membership of the council includes bishops, men and women religious, diocesan priests, deacons and lay persons, and is designed as a way for Catholics at the grassroots to comment on the work of the bishops' conference. The most numerous group (30 members) is comprised of lay men and women, appointed by the bishops, representing different geographic regions.

Wester told the bishops this afternoon that because the conference is taking up fewer documents these days, the council has had time to ponder issues that aren't part of the formal USCCB agenda. Their recommendation on the economic crisis is one fruit of that effort.

"The church and the wider society need a strong, clear, compelling call to action from the bishops as a whole," Wester said, reflecting the council's discussion.

"The letter of Bishop [William] Murphy [of Rockville Center] to the Bush administration, about the need to find a moral response, is a good starting point, but a greater level of outreach and action is required from the bishops."

Wester said the council urged the bishops to offer a "pastoral and prophetic perspective," such as a transition from "self-reliance to God-reliance, mutual responsibility, responsible stewardship, and

promoting human dignity [in areas such as] homelessness, lack of health care, and unemployment.?

Though Wester didn't make the point, an important Catholic response to the economic crisis is set to appear in coming days in the form of Pope Benedict XVI's new social encyclical, *Veritas in Caritate* (Truth in Charity). Vatican sources say the encyclical, which Benedict XVI recently described as a meditation on "the vast theme of the economy and work," should be issued before the pope's summer vacation begins July 13.

Release of the encyclical has been delayed for almost two years in order to reflect on the current global economic meltdown.

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