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George questions role of independent Catholic media

by Jerry Filteau



BALTIMORE

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Nov. 16 that Catholic publications, universities or other organizations that insist on complete independence from their bishops are "sectarian, less than fully Catholic."

In his presidential address at the opening session of the fall USCCB general assembly in Baltimore, George announced that the bishops "have recently begun discussions on how we might strengthen our relationship to Catholic universities, to media claiming to be a voice in the church, and to organizations that direct various works under Catholic auspices."

According to *NCR* sources, those issues were to be the main topic of discussion in a three-hour executive session the afternoon of Nov. 18, when the bishops were slated to meet alone behind closed doors, with all reporters and observers and virtually all USCCB staff excluded.

George placed his comments in the context of the bishops' role in governance as promoters and guarantors of church unity.

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"Relations do not speak first of control but of love," he said. "If there is a loosening of relationship between ourselves and those whom Christ has given us to govern in love, it is for us to reach out and re-establish connections necessary for all to remain in communion."

After announcing that the bishops have initiated discussions on how to carry that out in relation to Catholic higher education, independent Catholic media and organizations that engage in activities under Catholic auspices, he added:

"Since everyone in Catholic communion is truly interrelated, and the visible nexus of these relations is the bishop, an insistence on complete independence from the bishop renders a person or institution sectarian, less than fully Catholic. The purpose of our reflections, therefore, is to clarify questions of truth or faith and of accountability or community among all those who claim to be part of Catholic communion."

At a press conference later that afternoon George declined to name specific Catholic media, higher education or other organizations that the bishops might have in mind, but he said that more generally "if any institution, including the media, calls itself Catholic," it is the moral responsibility of a bishop to assure that it is Catholic.

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That offers the bishops "a chance to clarify the relationship" and see if the entity in question is operating within the bonds of Catholic communion, he said.

It's the moral responsibility of bishops "to keep the faithful gathered around Christ," he said, so it is their responsibility, when institutions or organizations call themselves Catholic, to sort out what that means in each case.

Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco, chairman of the USCCB Communications Committee, added, "I think that it's a much more media-intensive landscape in this country than it was many years ago." He said he and other bishops now regularly face questions from Catholics who say that different media, all claiming to be Catholic, present different views of what the Catholic teaching is on various subjects.

"That really does challenge us to make sense of it," he said.

A new twist on the new Roman Missal project

Another surprise element introduced on the opening day of the bishops' Nov. 16-19 meeting came during initial informational presentation of several supposedly final segments of the new English translation of the Latin Roman Missal.

As the first of the five final segments was introduced, Bishop Donald W. Trautman of Erie, Pa., rose to

ask what had ever happened to the translations of the antiphons ? which the bishops had discussed in the first draft form a couple of years ago, he said, but which had never come back to them in final draft form for actual debate and vote.

Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the USCCB Committee on the Liturgy, answered that the antiphons did not come back to the bishops for approval because in the meantime the Holy See has taken their translation to itself.

Trautman asked, "How does that square with" the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, which plainly says that vernacular translations of the Latin liturgical texts are the responsibility of the local bishops' conferences.

He cited Paragraph 36.4 of the constitution, which says, "Translations from the Latin text into the mother tongue intended for use in the liturgy must be approved by the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority," as a conciliar mandate that, in his view, says no Vatican agency can usurp the role of the local bishops' conference in vetting and approving such liturgical texts.

Serratelli could only reiterate that the Vatican had assumed authority over the English antiphon translations and taken it out of the hands of the English-speaking bishops' conferences around the world.

George ruled Trautman's question out of order in the context of the business at hand, which concerned another set of texts, not the antiphons. When Trautman asked when or how his question might be in order, George assured him that room for his question would be made later in the meeting.

Other issues

Among other issues the bishops face during their Baltimore meeting are the church's involvement in U.S. health care reform, a proposed pastoral letter on marriage, a proposed statement on in vitro fertilization and other issues relating to human procreation and technology, and a revision of Catholic health care directives regarding nutrition and hydration in end-of-life situations.

Plans for a new letter/postcard campaign to promote constructive, humane comprehensive immigration reform was reported.

At a reception following the meeting's opening session, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, an agency of the USCCB that receives an annual anti-poverty collection established by the bishops, honored Brigitte Gynther, coordinator of Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida, for her role in supporting and empowering farmworkers in the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Those workers in Florida tomato fields essentially doubled their annual earnings from \$7,500 a year to around \$13,000 a year (still well below poverty level) just by demanding one penny more per pound of tomatoes they picked.

Gynther, now 27, got involved in Interfaith Action work after a visit to the Immokalee fields as a University of Notre Dame student. She began mobilizing fellow students to support the farmworkers, and then began mobilizing other faith communities across the country to boycott corporations buying Florida tomatoes in order to force them to begin demanding fairer wages for the workers harvesting the tomatoes that they were buying.

She has also been deeply involved fighting human trafficking and human slavery and played a significant role in development of a recent national movement, the Campaign for Fair Food.

The CCHD annual award -- to a young person exemplifying the campaign's ideal of service to the poor that involves helping those people lift themselves out of poverty ? is called the Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. Named after the late Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, every year it honors a young Catholic, between the ages of 18 and 30, who exemplifies leadership in fighting poverty and injustice through community-based solutions.

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

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