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Bishops mull fighting abortion, gay marriage

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

BALTIMORE -- At a time of fractious debate within the Catholic Church in the U.S., the nation's top bishop on Monday (Nov. 16) said Catholic universities, media outlets or organizations that insist on independence from the church hierarchy are "less than fully Catholic."

In his address that opened the semi-annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago implored 300 fellow bishops to "look for ways to strengthen church unity."

"Since everything and everyone in Catholic communion is truly inter-related," George said, "... an insistence on complete independence from the bishop renders a person or institution sectarian, less than fully Catholic."

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In particular, church leaders have begun discussing ways to "strengthen our relationships" with Catholic universities, media "claiming the right to be a voice in the church," and organizations that work under Catholic auspices, George said.

"The faithful need the bishops in order to be Catholic, and the bishops need the faithful in order to be Catholic pastors," said George, the president of the bishops conference.

George's address comes as the nation's 67 million Catholics are sharply divided on a number of religious and political issues, including same-sex marriage, health care, and abortion, and as the church comes

under criticism -- sometimes from its own members -- for its uncompromising stance on those issues.

This month, a scion of the nation's most prominent Catholic family, Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., has been engaged in a war of words with his bishop, Thomas Tobin of Providence, over abortion and health care. Kennedy's support for abortion rights "is unacceptable to the church and ... absolutely diminishes your communion with the church," Tobin wrote in a public letter to Kennedy.

Kennedy has insisted that "the fact that I disagree with the hierarchy of the church on some issues does not make me any less of a Catholic."

Meanwhile, the Archdiocese of Washington has threatened to cancel its multi-million-dollar social service contracts in Washington if the city legalizes gay marriage. Some members of Congress, including Catholics, have questioned the bishops' influential role in the health care reform legislation on the Hill.

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Jon O'Brien, president of the group Catholics for Choice, said in a statement that "conservatives, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have been presenting their own views as an accurate representation of all U.S. Catholics." But surveys show a significant gap between the abortion views of bishops and a majority of lay Catholics, O'Brien said.

George defended the bishops' political involvement, which includes a successful push for an anti-abortion amendment in the health care reform bill the House passed Nov. 7.

"It is not for us, as bishops, to speak to a particular means of delivering health care," George said Monday. "It is our responsibility, however, to insist, as a moral voice concerned with human solidarity, that everyone should be cared for, and that no one should be deliberately killed."

The bishops have shown no signs of withdrawing from debate on controversial public issues. At their meeting here this week, bishops are expected to approve a statement on marriage that strongly condemns efforts to legalize same-sex unions; to reinforce the church's ban on many forms of contraception and reproductive technologies; and to insist that health care workers are obligated to provide most severely brain-damaged patients with food and water.

"To limit our teaching or governing to what the state is not interested in would be to betray both the Constitution of our country and, much more importantly, the Lord himself," George said.

George acknowledged that the Catholic hierarchy's moral authority has been tarnished by the clergy sex abuse scandal that cost the church more than \$2.6 billion since 1950. But, he said "the sinfulness of churchmen cannot be allowed to discredit the truth of Catholic teaching or to destroy the relationships that create ecclesial communion."

"The proper response to a crisis of governance," George said, "is not no governance but effective governance."

Peter Isely of Milwaukee, a board member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), accused the bishops of focusing on politics while largely ignoring lingering problems from the abuse scandal.

"The problem isn't 'no governance,' it's the same governance," Isely said in a statement. "The same

secretive, rigid, all-male monarchy that caused the crisis and causes the continued coverup is still in place. Many of the same men who hid predators and evidence and crimes are still bishops today."

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