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Bishops agree to prepare document on preaching

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

BELLEVUE, Wash. -- Following a lively debate on the first day of their spring general assembly near Seattle, the U.S. bishops voted overwhelmingly to authorize preparation of a 50-page document on preaching for consideration in November 2012.

St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson presented the proposal on behalf of the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, which he chairs, but said the document would be drawn up in consultation with various committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Archbishop Carlson said the document would be "at once inspirational and practical, ... grounded in the tradition of the church" and would aim to "adequately convey the purpose of the homily at Mass: the personal encounter with the Incarnate Word."

The topic seemed to light a spark in the bishops, more than a dozen of whom spoke in favor of the proposed document.

Describing himself as a member of "the first lost generation of poor catechesis," Bishop Alexander K. Sample of Marquette, Mich., said his generation of post-Vatican II Catholics had "raised up another generation that is equally uncatechized."

Although some have expressed the sentiment that "the homily should not be a time for catechesis," Bishop Sample said "we cannot lose that opportunity to truly catechize and form our people" when they are gathered for Sunday Mass.

Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, said that even at bishops' meetings 35 years ago, "some would rise to say that we need to have something on sermons."

"People are looking for it and desperately need it," he said. "It is such an important part of our responsibility of bishops."

But he said the topic of preaching was "so complicated and there are so many things we hope" to include in such a document that it is "sort of impossible" to get everything into a 50-page document. But, he added, "nothing is impossible with God."

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., expressed hope that the document would "identify the major obstacles to good preaching," including time constraints, communication issues and cultural conflicts.

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Peter A. Rosazza of Hartford, Conn., said he hoped the document would include information about "different preaching styles," such as those used by African-American or Hispanic preachers, while Bishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of Oakland, Calif., said he thought the document should focus not only on Sunday homilies but on sermons at funerals and weddings.

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"I've heard very few funeral homilies, and I've been to a lot of funerals," Bishop Cordileone said. "I've heard eulogies and I've heard some canonization nominations, but I have heard very few homilies."

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