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Bishops gear up for fight with Obama

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

When the nation's Catholic bishops gather for their annual fall meeting next week (Nov. 14-16) in Baltimore, the issue that will stand out in an otherwise small-bore internal agenda is their growing resolve to engage in politically charged battles over gay marriage and access to abortion and contraception.

In fact, during their gathering -- which has been shortened from four days to three -- the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is not scheduled to deal with the nation's economic misery, populist anger at Washington or even the unprecedented indictment of a Missouri bishop accused of failing to report a suspected child abuser.

Instead, the bishops are due to focus on various liturgical and financial proposals, and will also spend time discussing their approach to culture war issues that seem certain to worsen the bishops' already tense relationship with the Obama administration just as the 2012 campaign heats up.

The bishops' strategy is centered around their new Committee for Religious Liberty, which was unveiled just days after the bishops' president, New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, warned President Obama that his decision not to defend a federal ban on gay marriage could "precipitate a national conflict between church and state of enormous proportions."

A group of leading American bishops took that same dire message to Pope Benedict XVI and Vatican officials this week to rally support for their efforts, which they see as key to averting an era of religious persecution.

"Obviously, the issues around same-sex marriage are putting the church on a collision course with the civil authority in many different ways," Boston's Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley told Catholic News Service on Tuesday (Nov. 8).

O'Malley said the bishops -- including Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., head of the religious liberty committee -- told Vatican officials that they are "very, very concerned" because "the church's freedom is constantly being eroded" in the U.S.

The hierarchy also wants to make sure that all U.S. bishops are on board, which is apparently why leaders allotted some of the shortened three-day meeting to discussing religious freedom in a public session.

That is "quite significant," said Russell Shaw, a former spokesman for the bishops who has attended every annual meeting since 1969. "This general meeting is how they're moving to bring all of the bishops into the act."

Holding an open discussion, he said, "gives them a chance to express their opinions, ventilate a bit, and get on board with whatever it is the national conference is going to be doing in the months and years ahead."

There is widespread unease that the bishops are losing ground in the culture wars, including rising support -- especially among Catholics -- for same-sex marriage, and the erosion of conscience protections on abortion and contraception.

In addition to the new religious freedom panel, the conference also hired two full-time staffers to oversee the effort, and tapped their top lawyer, Anthony R. Picarello Jr., to shape the bishops' approach to "policy and advocacy."

"He's a tough, smart young lawyer," said Shaw. "He's very, very prepared, I know, to fight this out, as long as it takes, and is kind of looking forward to the fight, as a matter of fact."

Church insiders say the hierarchy's internal political dynamics are driving the new, narrow focus.

For one thing, the bishops badly want to move beyond the sexual abuse crisis that has sapped their energies and credibility over the past decade. They seem especially eager not to get drawn into the recent indictment of Kansas City Bishop Robert Finn for failing to report a priest suspected of child abuse to police.

"What happens in Kansas City stays in Kansas City," is how a priest who works closely with the bishops put it.

Moreover, the bishops are too divided to produce landmark documents on war and the economy as they did in the 1980s, insiders say. Opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion are simple, black-and-white issues that all the bishops can get behind.

What's more, with the bishops so focused on culture war issues, there is little room for lengthy discussion on complex issues.

"We're into this 'no-enemies-to-our-right' phase," said a former conference staffer who requested anonymity because he still advises the hierarchy.

Such a single-minded strategy, however, also can lead to overreach. Last week, the bishops' self-described "marriage guy," adviser Daniel Avila, had to resign after penning a newspaper column that said a homosexual orientation was the work of Satan.

But that is a minor setback in a longer struggle.

"This is not just a fight with the Obama administration," Shaw added. "It's going to go on long after President Obama and his people leave the scene."

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