

Bishops discuss religious liberty, marriage at annual meeting

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A bishop reviews documents Nov. 14 during the U.S. bishops' annual fall meeting in Baltimore. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

BALTIMORE -- At the start of their annual three-day fall assembly in Baltimore, the U.S. bishops were urged to restore the luster, credibility and beauty of the Catholic Church in the hearts of its members.

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York called on his fellow bishops Nov. 14 to communicate to the world that the sinfulness of the church's members is not "a reason to dismiss the church or her eternal truths, but to embrace her all the more."

In his first presidential address since election as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last November, he opened and closed with the words: "Love for Jesus and his church must be the passion of our lives."

He noted that the church still has plenty to say to the modern world.

"She dares the world ... to foster and protect the inviolable dignity of the human person and human life; ... to protect marriage and family; to embrace those suffering and struggling; to prefer service to selfishness; and never, ever to stifle the liberty to quench the deep-down thirst for the divine."

Archbishop Dolan later pointed out that he was encouraged by a Nov. 8 private meeting he had with President Barack Obama at the White House.

He said he found the president to be "very open to the sensitivities" of the U.S. Catholic Church on issues related to religious freedom that the two discussed. He said the current issues related to religious liberty and government might be an area where there is room for compromise.

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., and chairman of a new Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, outlined some of the issues at stake in a report to the bishops.

He said several situations involving church and government are related to policies of the Department of Health and Human Services. They include draft HHS regulations that would require all private health insurance plans

to provide coverage for sterilization and contraception.

HHS also recently denied a one-year grant to the U.S. Catholic bishops' Migration and Refugee Services to aid foreign-born human trafficking victims. The attention has focused on requirements in the guidelines for the new grants that called for agencies to offer the "full range of reproductive service," including abortion and contraception, to trafficking victims.

Bishop Lori also cited the Department of Justice's shift from defending the Defense of Marriage Act to opposing it in court "as an act of 'bias and prejudice' akin to racism, thereby implying that churches which teach that marriage is between a man and a woman are guilty of bigotry."

He said the bishops see a pattern in culture and law to treat religion "as merely a private matter between an individual and one's own God. ... Some decisions and some administrative regulations treat religion not as a contributor to our nation's common morality but rather as a divisive and disruptive force better kept out of public life."

The U.S. bishops' campaign to strengthen marriage has reached a large audience and also has been garnered awards from professional advertising organizations, the chairman of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth reported to the bishops Nov. 14.

In a presentation on the work of the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., said the public service announcements with messages about marriage had been measured as having 1.3 billion "audience impressions" since they began several years ago. He said the campaign won a national public relations award in 2009 and has been the most successful effort of its kind ever sponsored by the USCCB.

Public service announcements with the theme of "a good marriage goes a long way" were released in September to 1,600 television stations and 7,000 radio stations, he said.

During a news conference after the morning session, Archbishop Dolan spoke about Penn State University's sex abuse scandal, which he said shows both the scope of the abuse problem and the value of safe environment training.

He said the indictment of several Penn State officials and the firing of the university's president and its longtime football coach "has reopened a wound in the church as well."

"It shows that the scourge (of sex abuse) is not limited to any one faith and certainly not limited to priests," he said. "It's in organizations, in universities, all over the place, in families and, yes, in priests."

Archbishop Dolan said the church's own sex abuse scandal "makes us a little timid about wanting to give advice" but he said the church's experience with providing safe environment training to help children and their parents, as well as clergy and church volunteers, become more aware of the warning signs of child sex abuse has been "phenomenally advantageous" over the past decade.

During the first day's session, the bishops also met Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the new apostolic nuncio to the United States, who said he was pleased to be with them for the first time. He told the bishops the pope puts great hope in this country for the future of the universal church.

In votes during the day, the bishops approved a \$217.4 million budget for 2012 and a 3 percent increase in diocesan assessments for 2013. They gave preliminary consideration to a resolution that would extend a call to bishops to adhere to sound financial reporting within their dioceses; a vote was scheduled for the next day.

The new primate for the world's 8 million Ukrainian-rite Catholics lauded the work of the U.S. bishops' annual national collection to aid the church in Central and Eastern Europe. Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk said the collection has provided financial support for the development of basic church structures which had been destroyed by the communist regime.

"Today the church is undergoing a period of rebirth and resurrection," Archbishop Shevchuk said. In other voting, Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle was elected USCCB secretary-elect. Bishop Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, was elected chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace.

Bishops also elected new committee chairs including: Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, communications; Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, cultural diversity; Archbishop John C. Nienstedt of St. Paul and Minneapolis, doctrine; Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr of Cincinnati, national collections; and Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston, pro-life activities.

The bishops voted 154-2 to add Oct. 22 as an optional memorial for Blessed John Paul II in the proper of saints calendar for the United States. The bishops also were to vote on an optional memorial for Blessed Marianne Cope.

Another worship-related item on the bishops' agenda -- a new English translation of the Rite for Blessing the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick, and for Consecrating the Chrism -- was deferred until the Vatican develops new texts. The bishops were advised to use the texts currently found in the Sacramentary for the year 2012.

Contributing to this report were Nancy Frazier O'Brien, Mark Pattison and Patricia Zapor in Baltimore and Carol Zimmermann in Washington.

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