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USCCB reality TV

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Just Catholic

The webcasted November meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops held the excitement of a gathering of accountants discussing actuarial tables. You can catch reruns on the USCCB website.

Even so, the 300 or so bishops, most over the age of 60, seemed to enjoy their Baltimore sojourn.

At least two public talks -- one by Bridgeport, Conn., Bishop William Lori on religious liberty, another by Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl on the coming Anglican Ordinariate -- relieved the tedium of numbers, names and PowerPoint.

Both Lori and Wuerl were articulate and precise. Each looking exhausted, they covered their topics without a nod to the several elephants camped in their midst.

It's not just the sex mess. It's women and inclusive language. It's married priests. It's the plight of the poor. You almost want to scream at the screen.

To be fair, Lori carried the religious liberty banner to the threshold of the Supreme Court, declaring neither abortion nor same-sex marriage is supported by the Constitution of the United States. Like it or not, Lori's list of intrusions on personal and corporate religious freedoms truly demonstrated the growing public antithesis toward any religious values.

But, focusing on Catholic values in collision with the public sector, Lori twinned same-sex marriage with life issues. That is a mistake.

Connecting the two -- the one a political football that might have been deflated if bishops had worked (publicly or privately) for civil unions, the other an issue rooted in embryology -- will backfire. Already,

pundits are complaining that if the bishops don't like same-sex marriage, they should not have their hands in the public trough, because homosexuals pay taxes. That could catch on. We already know about the "take public funds, play by public rules" movement in health care.

But I kept thinking about women, about language, as speaker after speaker rose to confirm the status quo. At no point, as far as I could tell, were women mentioned at all -- not even the wives of the Anglican-turned-Catholic priests Wuerl so happily described. The new Anglican Ordinariate is for clergy and faithful of the Anglican Rite; the pastoral provision allows Anglican clergy to become Latin Rite. Each includes married priests. But, as Wuerl emphasized, if the as-yet-unnamed Anglican ordinary is married, he cannot become a bishop. Nor can new Latin priests become canonical pastors if they are married.

Go figure.

It's hard to know what to think. The largest elephant did get a mention from Bishop R. Daniel Conlon (Joliet, Ill.) who injected some reality into reality TV, and USCCB Secretary Bishop George V. Murry, SJ (Youngstown) acknowledged that the sex mess "does cast a shadow on everything we do."

A shadow? Try mudslide.

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And Conlon asked, With all the talk of religious liberty and evangelization, who will be doing this? Who will be evangelizing? Who will pursue religious concerns? (I don't think the word "deacon" was spoken by anyone.)

Yes, who will do this? Are women lining up to help? Are they dragging their husbands and checkbooks to church? Are they sending their sons off to seminary?

Women angry about so many things about the church's administration can take cold comfort in the opening presidential address of New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan, which surely echoed through the entire meeting.

Dolan repeatedly called the church "she" and "her," saying "he (Christ) and she (his church), are one," using terminology the contemporary ear does not receive positively. The bishops, he noted, are "married" to the church, extending the outdated and frankly creepy metaphor to say the bishops "passionately love our bride, with wrinkles, warts and wounds."

Is that how bishops see the church? A wrinkled and damaged old hag? What must they think of themselves? Can they not see what is going on, or what all this looks like?

I think that is the bottom line of it all. An aging cadre of tired men spent the better part of a week arranging deck chairs on a foundering ship, talking about money, feast days and strategic plans, giving status reports on absent ailing fellow bishops, announcing details of the funeral of one of them.

You have to wonder if any of them heard what Conlon said. You have to hope they talked about the real problems at least at coffee breaks and receptions.

One thing is for sure. While the staggering losses of membership and credibility outside the room full of elephants may be old news, the reasons for the bishops' lack of influence within and without the church were not really addressed, at least in public.

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