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Diversity shows at bishops' meeting

by Jerry Filteau by Dennis Coday

ATLANTA -- Looking across the hotel conference room, one is struck by the seeming homogeneity of the U.S. bishops, gathered here for their annual spring meeting. But the uniform black suits, Roman collars and pectoral crosses disguise the diversity of the group, a diversity of temperament, politics and perhaps theology.

More than half of the June 13-15 meeting was held behind closed doors, but in the sessions that were public, that diversity shone through.

The one action item the bishops had to vote on was a proposal to have its Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development draft a special message, with the working title "Catholic Reflections on Work, Poverty and a Broken Economy."

The proposal to draft the message was approved 171-26, easily exceeding the required simple majority of bishops present and voting, but not without discussion.

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., the bishops' point man on social justice issues, said a statement on the economy would be "timely, if not overdue."

"It has been a long time since the body of bishops has addressed the moral and human dimensions of economic life in light of Catholic teaching," Blaire said. "This is especially urgent when so many of our people are suffering and wonder whether their church cares and has anything to say about their situation and the economy that has left them behind."

Retired Archbishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston suggested that the message, while not a new pastoral letter on the economy, should "incorporate the basic principles" of the bishops' major 1986 pastoral letter on the subject, "Economic Justice for All."

A number of bishops raised concerns that the document could be seen as implicitly criticizing Republican budget policies and could be seen as too political. These bishops also offered suggestions for tweaking a proposed outline of the message to highlight particular areas, such as the role of family life in a sound economy and how the principle of subsidiarity should inform the document. Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., asked that the message note the importance of the private sector in job creation.

Blaire's committee is to draft a 12-15 page "pastoral message" -- not a policy statement -- that the bishops will debate and release in November, a week after the presidential election.

The most intense discussion of the meeting came June 14 during a presentation by Salt Lake City Bishop John Wester, who had been asked to review the conference's communication strategy. Wester's study recommended ramping up the bishops' conference presence in social media and other digital media to increase the bishops' ability to communicate directly with pew-sitting Catholics, bypassing secular mass media intermediaries.

What sparked the bishops' interest most, however, was the recommendation of hiring an official spokesperson who could address issues of concern rapidly. Conference president Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York enthusiastically seconded this suggestion.

A dozen or more bishops spoke from the floor on this recommendation, most endorsing the idea, but some offering cautions.

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Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley acknowledged some recent communication "debacles" -- mentioning among other things, the Vatican's dealings with the women religious and the U.S. bishops' scrutiny of the Girl Scouts. "We need more help and more sophistication in our messaging," he said.

Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., agreed that the conference needs someone who can "strategize this better for us." He said, "If we don't get our message out there quickly enough, they [secular media] get to say it before we say it, and our people get confused."

Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory said he "endorsed the idea 100 percent" but added that to be effective, the spokesperson must have the complete confidence of the leadership of the conference and "the confidence to make statements that won't be undermined by one of us."

The bishops devoted much time to issues of religious freedom at home and abroad. "We are facing not just one, but a series of extraordinary challenges in this area," said Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty.

The committee presented multiple sessions, including moving testimony by Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of the Chaldean Catholic church in Iraq, and a scholarly review by John Garvey, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Notre Dame and Boston College before becoming president of The Catholic University of America in Washington in 2010. Garvey noted several recent federal actions that have "narrowed considerably" the "landscape of religious freedom" in the United States. Still, most attention was focused on the U.S. bishops' campaign against President Barack Obama's proposed mandate to require employers -- including religious institutions -- to provide free contraception insurance coverage to employees.

Lori was promoting the rallies, marches and education efforts that are part of the bishops' Fortnight for Freedom campaign meant to galvanize Catholic opposition to the contraception mandate. Seventy of the country's 190 diocese had plans for the fortnight, which opened June 21 with Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore and concludes July 4 with the tolling of bells at churches across the country at noon Eastern time.

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, papal nuncio to the United States, called the Fortnight for Freedom "praiseworthy," saying it "has my full support," and that he would join observances in Washington. The U.S. Catholic church is facing a significant challenge on "the whole question of freedom of religion and conscience," he said. The fact that the current conflict is taking place "in the context of an election year" makes "interventions even more delicate."

Responding to a reporter's question June 13 about the perception of partisanship in the religious liberty campaign, Lori said that it "is not in any way partisan, either in its spirit or in its funding."

Lori said the religious liberty campaign was being funded by the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Malta, *Our Sunday Visitor* and "many other groups as well."

"They [the Knights of Columbus] have been generous to a whole variety of causes, including this one," he said.

"Think of what the Knights of Columbus does for the Catholic church and for many other humanitarian causes," he said. "To try to say that is in some way partisan is ... an injustice."

In the packets of material handed out at the Atlanta meeting were white, square Fortnight for Freedom lapel pins. By the end of the public sessions June 14, many of the bishops were wearing them. A majority were not.

A complete listing of stories from the bishops' meeting in Atlanta can be found here.

[Dennis Coday is *NCR* editor. Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent. Religion News Service and Catholic News Service reports were used in this article.]

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