

Minnesota group calls for greater transparency after closed archdiocesan meeting

Joe Winter | Sep. 19, 2013
Eden Prairie, Minn.

Church and school finances and a proposed \$165 million capital campaign were on the agenda of a St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese meeting Monday that was held for priests only, and a group of Catholics who are calling for greater transparency from church leaders found themselves without a seat at the table.

Members of the Catholic Coalition for Church Reform sought to have the meeting open to its members as well as to any laity who wished to attend. Robert Beutel, a St. Paul attorney and co-chair of the board for the group, said administrators and financial officers of parishes and of the archdiocese who are not priests, as well as deacons, apparently were excluded from the event -- titled Priest Finance Day -- held at an Eden Prairie church.

In response to the reform group's request, Archbishop John Nienstedt, who did attend, said in an Aug. 21 letter that the meeting is "intended to be a professional gathering for those who have been duly ordained to the Catholic priesthood."

Up for discussion were the capital campaign to raise money for Catholic schools, charities, seminarian education and preservation of the St. Paul Cathedral and Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis; the annual Catholic Services Appeal; and lay and priest pension plans, said Beutel, who obtained the agenda from a member of his group.

The archdiocese previously announced changes to the assessment formula it uses to obtain funds from individual parishes. For almost one-fourth of the parishes, the percentage of income they were expected to give to the archdiocese rose to 9 percent from 8 percent, though 50 parishes did report a reduction in assessed income.

Beutel said his group is asking for a meeting open to laity and will press their parish priests to give details from the pulpit at weekend Masses.

Jim Accurso, a spokesman for archdiocese, compared the meeting to a gathering a corporation might have with a specific group of employees. He said laypersons have plenty of opportunities to communicate with diocesan leaders and pointed to a handful of town hall meetings held in recent years.

"Any impression that there has not been an opportunity for the laity to have input is inaccurate," Accurso told *NCR* on Wednesday.

The Catholic Coalition for Church Reform has existed in the archdiocese for almost four years, Beutel said. The group is planning a Sept. 28 "synod of the baptized" to discuss church changes, and he said hundreds are expected to attend.

Members of the group agree the chance for dialogue exists but say it is limited to subjects that diocesan leaders designate as appropriate. They point to an archdiocese statement from 2010 that was made in response to

another of the group's assemblies.

The archdiocese "wishes to lovingly caution those members of the faithful participating in the work-study groups and intending to attend the synod of the potential that the issues on which CCCR will seek reform are magisterial teachings of the church and are therefore to be believed by divine and Catholic faith," the statement said.

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