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North Carolina bishops to exit council over same-sex marriage, abortion

Patricia L. Guilfoyle Catholic News Service | Sep. 30, 2013
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Both North Carolina Catholic bishops are resigning from the North Carolina Council of Churches, an ecumenical organization comprised of Christian church leaders from across the state, because the group supports some issues that contradict Catholic teaching.

In a statement Friday, Charlotte Bishop Peter Jugis and Raleigh Bishop Michael Burbidge said they "deeply value the long-standing relationship with the North Carolina Council of Churches and have informed the council of their strong desire to continue to work together on issues where there is substantial agreement."

However, the North Carolina Council of Churches has taken positions contrary to Catholic teaching on marriage, and the council does not formally oppose abortion. Catholics believe marriage is a covenant only between one man and one woman, and that the evil of abortion must be opposed in every instance.

The bishops said they and the council's leadership were unable to agree on a way they could remain members while continuing to uphold Catholic teaching.

The two dioceses will end their memberships effective Dec. 31, when the first year of the two-year term of the council's president, Alberta Hairston, ends. Hairston will step down in accordance with the bishops' decision.

Hairston, a member of St. Pius X Parish in Greensboro, has represented the Charlotte diocese on the council for about 16 years. She said she is disappointed that the council and the bishops could not find a way they could remain members, but the issue has been something they have all been struggling with for "four to five years."

"It was given quite a bit of consideration," Hairston said, adding, "For me as a Catholic, it's been a very difficult time. I hate to see that there is an organization that is trying to do ecumenical things, but the Catholic church will not be part of that."

Other Catholics in council leadership positions also will leave Dec. 31. They include at-large member Fr. Carlos Arce, vicar of Hispanic ministry for the Raleigh diocese; at-large member Atonement Br. Bill Martyn of Cary, who chairs the Raleigh diocese's ecumenical commission; and the council's business and finance committee chairwoman, Marie Vetter of Durham.

According to its website, the North Carolina Council of Churches was founded in 1935 to promote Christian unity and justice. Membership includes 18 Christian denominations and more than 6,200 congregations, its website states.

The Raleigh diocese, followed by the Charlotte diocese, became full members of the North Carolina Council of Churches in 1977, under the leadership of then-Raleigh Bishop F. Joseph Gossman, who died in August.

The Catholic bishops noted in their statement that they decided to quit the council only after "an extensive series of discussions" with the council's leadership, in which they had proposed remaining with the organization in a newly created role as "observer." The council rejected that proposal, they said.

Hairston said the council offered to let the two dioceses shift from full membership to an existing loosely defined category of affiliates called "Covenant Partners," but that was not agreeable, either.

Current "Covenant Partner" St. Pius X in Greensboro also will withdraw from the council, said its pastor, Msgr. Anthony Marcaccio.

In their statement, the North Carolina bishops emphasized they want to continue working with the council on shared interests that align with Catholic teaching -- including comprehensive immigration reform, repeal of the death penalty, advocacy of just wages and working conditions, as well as efforts to eliminate poverty, hunger and racial discrimination.

Both bishops have publicly advocated for all of these issues, individually as well as through their public policy arm, Catholic Voice NC.

"While working with the administrative structure of the council is not possible," they noted in their statement, "collaboration on these and other important issues with religious leaders throughout our state will continue. The funding paid to the council for membership will now be redirected to support these essential initiatives."

Both the Charlotte and Raleigh dioceses withheld their membership dues last year in protest of the council's stance on same-sex marriage, during the statewide constitutional amendment campaign to protect traditional marriage.

But the diocese of Charlotte recently paid $6,000 to renew its membership for 2013, according to diocesan officials.

Both Catholic bishops supported the 2012 constitutional amendment and encouraged Catholics to do the same, and North Carolina voters approved the measure by a wide margin.

In their statement, the bishops said they "will continue to embrace every future opportunity possible to stand side by side with religious leaders throughout our great state to address those issues which impact our community and with which we can speak as one voice, symbolizing the unity that is ours as members of God's holy family."

Hairston said she hopes the council and the two dioceses find ways to continue working together on common concerns. She underscored the bishops' statement that there are many important issues on which the council and Catholics agree, especially when it comes to advocating for immigration reform, health care reform, human rights and environmental stewardship.

That interreligious dialogue is important, both to promote the common good as well as to evangelize to non-Catholics, she said.

"I always have hope because I am a woman of faith. Because if you have faith, there's always hope," she said.

[Patricia L. Guilfoyle is editor of the *Catholic News Herald*, newspaper of the diocese of Charlotte, N.C.]

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