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Bishops, at annual meeting, invited to Catholic Worker dinner for peace

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

Fall bishops' meeting 2013

Baltimore — As the U.S. bishops start their annual meeting here Monday morning, they are facing a number of tough choices: who to elect as their new president, what tone to adopt in the new Pope Francis era, and how to engage the wider culture.

Another hard decision: Where to eat dinner each night, and with whom.

If the stakes on this one seem a bit more personal, perhaps they are. But Tomas Murray, a member of a Catholic Worker community in Ohio, thinks where the bishops choose to eat also sends a significant message about how they see the role of the U.S. Catholic church.

Murray is one of several people hosting an alternative dinner option for the prelates Tuesday night. They want the focus of their meal, held on the night of the annual assembly at which the bishops are also invited to a dinner in support of Catholic military chaplains, to be focused on peacemaking.

The U.S. bishops are meeting in Baltimore for their annual plenary assembly Monday through Thursday.

Murray said the idea for the alternative meal came as he and the others reflected on the bishops' vote last year to support the sainthood cause for Dorothy Day, the New Yorker who with Peter Maurin co-founded the Catholic Worker.

Opening what they called a "house of hospitality" in 1933, the two launched a movement now emulated in small communities across the country that focus on living the works of mercy in various ways. One

unifying theme: staunch opposition to war and war making.

"We were struck by the irony that last year at the fall conference, the bishops voted unanimously ... to progress the cause of Dorothy Day, and yet the biggest event of their conference is a dinner for chaplains," Murray said. "So we thought, 'Why don't we have a roundtable discussion and invite the bishops to it?'"

"We thought maybe it could be some way of maybe having an alternative meal where the focus is on peacemaking," he said.

Murray and others are hosting their meal, at which the menu is to include soup and reclaimed bread, at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at Baltimore's historic St. Vincent de Paul Catholic parish. The parish is located about a mile north of the hotel where the U.S. bishops are meeting.

Murray said two bishops have already accepted an invitation: Bishop John Michael Botean, a cleric in the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church who is the bishop of the Romanian Catholic Eparchy of St George's in Canton, Ohio; and Indianapolis Archbishop Joseph Tobin.

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Botean, who is a member of both the U.S. bishops' conference and the Romanian Catholic Synod, was noted during the beginning of the Iraq War for directly speaking out against the conflict. In a Lenten 2003 pastoral letter, he called it "objectively grave evil, a matter of mortal sin."

Botean also started the Alliance Catholic Worker in May and named the community's house of hospitality for Joshua Casteel, a U.S. Army soldier who said he experienced a spiritual awakening while serving as an interrogator at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and was later granted conscientious objector status and honorably discharged.

A convert to Catholicism, Casteel died from cancer in August 2012.

Tobin, who has led the Indianapolis archdiocese since October 2012, was previously second-in-command at the Vatican's congregation in charge of matters of religious life.

While the U.S. bishops' spokeswoman did not return a call Friday for information about the bishops' dinner for military chaplains, the director of the Air Force's chaplains said Monday that their event is held by the Air Force and Army chaplain corps to thank the bishops for their support of chaplains.

Fr. John Kinney, who is the director of the Air Force's program, said the corps will also thank the bishops for lending priests to the archdiocese of the military services, which coordinates chaplains in all of the services.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the current president of the bishops' conference, is the promoter of Day's canonization cause. Dolan's predecessor in New York, the late Cardinal John O'Connor, started the cause in 2000. A Brooklyn native, Day died in 1980.

Murray said he expects "about 20 people" for the alternative dinner Tuesday, which he said will see a "small, simple Catholic Worker roundtable discussion."

Others involved in hosting the event are members of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House in

Washington, the Viva House Catholic Worker in Baltimore, and the metropolitan D.C. chapter of Pax Christi USA.

Murray said they extended an invitation to the dinner to "about 30" of the some 300 bishops expected to attend the plenary assembly. Besides Botean and Tobin, Murray said several of the bishops invited said they already had a previous commitment.

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