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Archbishop warns of 'balkanization' in US church

by Joshua J. McElwee

LATROBE, PA. -- A prominent U.S. archbishop has warned that the divisive nature of the nation's politics -- particularly the separation of people into disparate ideological camps -- may be seeping into the American Catholic church, leading to a "balkanization" of the faithful.

Indianapolis Archbishop Joseph Tobin also warned against a trend in the U.S. church to "oversimplify what are really complicated questions in the hope of discovering who to blame."

"At the present moment, this behavior helps to contribute to the balkanization of American Catholics into so-called right wing and left wing, or progressive and traditionalist, factions, who point fingers at each other," Tobin said Friday, speaking at a theological convention.

"In my opinion, finger pointing does a great harm to religious life because it makes us defensive," Tobin continued. Under such finger pointing, he said, "we feel constantly compelled to defend ourselves against other parties in the church."

"Such self protection will make us less likely to humbly examine the distance between our ideals and the present moment, which is the point of departure for a life of continuing conversion," said the archbishop.

Tobin, who until 2010 served at the Vatican as the number two official of the congregation responsible for men and women religious around the world, was speaking at the annual assembly of the College Theology Society.

The society, which represents lay and religious teachers of undergraduate theology from both Catholic and other ecumenical backgrounds, met Thursday through Sunday for its 60th annual assembly at Benedictine-run Saint Vincent College in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The theme of this year's gathering ? "God has begun a great work in us: The embodiment of love in contemporary consecrated life" ? was focused specifically on Catholic religious life, partially in the light of the Vatican's continuing criticism of an umbrella group of U.S. Catholic sisters known as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

One of three plenary speakers at the event, Tobin did not specifically mention the row between the Vatican and U.S. sisters during his talk, instead focusing on a wide analysis on the role of religious life in the church. But at several points in his 45-minute address and in answering questions from theologians afterward, the archbishop gave a frank assessment of the struggles facing the American church.

In response to one question, Tobin even said some U.S. bishops are finding Pope Francis' leadership style difficult to understand.

"What I've seen is how disruptive Pope Francis has been within the hierarchy of the United States," said Tobin. "I was talking to a couple of brother bishops a while back and they were saying that bishops and priests were very discouraged by Pope Francis because he was challenging them."

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"I think there was a particular image, perhaps, of what it means to be a pastoral leader in this country, and Francis is disturbing it," he continued. "I think there is some resistance to a different way of doing the Gospel mission of the church."

The archbishop paused before continuing with a smile: "So, pray for Francis' health."

Tobin also responded frankly to a question about how to improve dialogue between members of religious orders and bishops.

The first step, he said, is to understand that bishops and religious orders think about the church differently, with bishops sometimes focusing on more local concerns in their dioceses and religious orders ? which span across dioceses ? focusing on universal issues.

The "precondition" for dialog between the two, said Tobin, is "to at least admit that we think about the church differently and are not ready."

"Someone once said that heresy is always a reluctance to deal with complexity," he continued. "And I think the risks of some of the ideology in the church today is simply that ? it's a reluctance to deal with complexity."

"Dialogue happens when a bishop and consecrated people realize: 'Yeah, we think differently, and let's talk about it,'" he said.

Tobin addressed the issue of polarization in the U.S. church during his talk while examining the issue of inculturalization, a concept that Christians seeking to evangelize must adapt to and respect the culture of those they work with.

The archbishop, who is a member of the Redemptorists and served as the order's superior general from 2001-09, recalled meeting in 1993 with one of the order's provincials in Chile. The provincial, Tobin said, explained that he had been elected on the 35th ballot and that the members of his province at the time

were deeply polarized and unable to work with one another.

While the church had worked together to oppose the government of dictator Augusto Pinochet, the provincial said, after Pinochet's downfall in 1990 it began to exhibit some of his government's qualities.

"We hated the government," Tobin quoted the provincial. "We preached against it. We took to the streets against it. Some of us even went to jail in protest. We put our lives on the line to topple the dictatorship."

"But without us being aware of it, their way of thinking penetrated us," Tobin continued quoting the provincial. "And now we treat each other like [they treated us]. As a result, when a new junta assumes power in the province, it exiles all the enemies of the state."

The provincial, Tobin said, suggested "the dark side of inculturalization," where the Chilean Redemptorists "appropriated unwillingly the very values they opposed with such passion."

Tying the story to the U.S. church, the archbishop continued: "I wonder whether some of the echo of name-calling, labeling, and intolerance that appears to increasingly characterize the American political discourse? I wonder whether this intolerance passes unchallenged in the heart of the American Catholic church."

Tobin's concern for the deepening divide in the U.S. church was echoed at the convention by another of the plenary speakers, theologian Dennis Doyle.

Addressing what are known as the "new ecclesial movements," a diverse group of mostly lay-led associations of Catholics that usually focus on a central charism or mission, Doyle said that how other faithful consider those movements will depend on where they stand among the cultural divides.

"Many Catholics are divided into camps today," said Doyle, a professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton. "Since there are many gifts, but the same spirit, I discern a call for all Catholics to think and act in ways that transcend the camps."

The third plenary speaker at the event was Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, a renowned scriptural scholar and theologian who has written extensively on U.S. Catholic women religious.

Outside of the plenary sessions, the theologians gathered throughout the weekend in dozens of small group sessions for presentation of an exhaustive variety of papers from their peers, mostly focused on the theme of consecrated life.

Among those speakers was Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Sr. Anne Patrick, a long-time theologian and former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, a separate theological association. Patrick spoke on the role of prophecy in contemporary religious life, asking how Catholic sisters in particular can balance their idealism with "institutional realism."

"Is it possible that some women religious who aspire to prophecy are also called beyond critique to tasks of institutional creation and construction, tasks we might refer to as 'founding' and 're-founding'?" Patrick, an emeritus professor of religion at Carleton College in Minnesota, asked.

Joel Schmidt, an assistant professor of theology at Salve Regina University in Rhode Island, presented an analysis of LCWR's response to critiques of the organization from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Vatican congregation has said the group, which represents about 45,000 U.S. Catholic sisters, must enact reforms and place itself under the leadership of Seattle Archbishop Peter

Sartain.

Schmidt addressed specifically LCWR's contemplative decision-making process, in which members take long periods to find consensus together before coming to any decisions. Calling that process "contemplatively prophetic and prophetically contemplative," Schmidt said it is not just an exchange of ideas but a "discernment of insights in successively widening circles."

LCWR's process, he said, is "prophetically challenging the Roman Catholic church to consider alternatives" to its decision making processes.

Presenting at another of the sessions was Little Sister of Saint Francis Sr. Jane Wakahiu, who spoke on the history of religious orders across the continent of Africa. A native of Kenya, Wakahiu leads the African Sisters Education Collaborative, a Pennsylvania based group that provides training for African sisters in a number of countries.

Addressing the history of colonization in Africa, Wakahiu critiqued some of the methods employed by missionaries to the continent in the 19th century but also thanked those missionaries for their work.

Wakahiu critiqued specifically a mindset among early European missionaries that native Africans were not worthy of religious life, but instead were to be used as a sort of labor force. She shared a story of one elder African sister who remembered having to till a farm while her European counterparts worked inside on knitting.

But Wakahiu said the European sisters "brought religious life to Africa."

"Perhaps, if they had not had the courage we would not have religious life in Africa," she said.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

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