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Report from the USCCB meeting in Orlando; bioethics; pastoral letter on marriage; this year's CTSA gathering

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 13, 2008 All Things Catholic

I'm in Orlando this week, covering the spring meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Reports can be found under the "Daily Updates" section of this site at http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682 [1].

It's usually impossible to reduce these gatherings to a single storyline, and this edition was no exception. The bishops held a spirited debate over liturgical translation which produced a cliffhanger vote to be resolved by mail-in ballots from those not in attendance, balanced their collective checkbook, received an update on research into the "causes and context" of the sex abuse crisis, and listened to two experts in religious sociology describe changing demographics in American religion as well as changing patterns of sacramental practice.

Anyone who can spot a common thread in all that has a keener eye than I do. Details on the fracas over liturgical translation are here: http://ncrcafe.org/node/1911 [2]

That said, much of what happened in Orlando can loosely be grouped under the heading of "bioethics." Issues of sexuality, reproduction, and the family loomed large, whether in full public view, behind the scenes, or around the edges, and fallout seems likely to be felt in multiple arenas of Catholic life.

In Public

The bishops held two formal votes on bioethical questions, both of which endorsed a strong pro-life position.

They adopted a statement on embryonic stem cell research, the first time the conference has spoken specifically on the issue. It asserts that harvesting embryos for research amounts to "the deliberate killing of innocent human beings," and is therefore "a gravely immoral act."

The statement was prepared by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, led by Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia. Because Rigali wasn't in attendance, it was presented by Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas.

The bishops warn that embryonic stem cell research is potentially part of a slippery slope toward other

dangerous outcomes, including:

- Human cloning
- Putting women's health at risk in order to obtain eggs for the production of embryos
- Creating human/animal hybrids that blur the boundaries between species, once again in order to get egg cells

"Once we cross the fundamental moral line that prevents us from treating any fellow human being as a mere object of research, there is no stopping point," the bishops say. "The only moral stance that affirms the human dignity of us all is to reject the first step down this path."

The bishops add, however, that they are not opposed to scientific progress, endorsing research that relies upon adult tissues and umbilical cord blood.

In a separate action, the bishops moved towards a restrictive stance on whether artificially provided food and water may be withdrawn from patients in a persistent vegetative state. Until recently this has been considered an "open question" in Catholic ethics, but the door seems to be closing rapidly.

This "tightening up," in the eyes of many observers, is related to a sense that in broader social debates, "quality of life" arguments are increasingly being deployed to categorize some vulnerable lives as disposable - elderly and infirm people in the case of euthanasia, embryos in the case of stem cells. In that context, church leaders and some Catholic theologians today view patients with a permanent loss of consciousness, but who are otherwise stable, in a more protective light.

Technically, the vote in Orlando simply authorized the Committee on Doctrine to prepare "modest" revisions to the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, which govern Catholic hospitals and health care facilities in the United States, on the subject of artificial nutrition and hydration. It seems clear, however, that the revised Directives will eventually be brought into line with two Vatican statements espousing a restrictive view: a March 2004 address by Pope John Paul II, and an August 2007 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in response to questions posed by the U.S. bishops.

The Vatican statements assert that as a rule, withdrawing food and water from people who are otherwise stable amounts to a violation of basic human dignity. In effect, the statements say, it's a choice to let these patients die from thirst and hunger.

That position was also expressed in a recent article by Rigali and Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Connecticut, chair of the Committee on Doctrine, in Health Progress, a publication of the Catholic Health Association. (The bishops were responding to an essay critical of the Vatican statements by John Hart and Fr. Kevin O'Rourke of Loyola University in Chicago). Among other things, Rigali and Lori wrote that the Vatican statements apply beyond the persistent vegetative state. They cited quadriplegia, mental illness or Alzheimer's diseases - instances of what they called "chronic but stable debilitating conditions."

An additional bioethical question was briefly floated in Orlando, though without resolution: "embryo adoption." There was also a hint that the Vatican may soon speak on the issue.

Naumann told the bishops that the Committee on Pro-Life Activities is working on a longer document about reproductive technologies, such as in-vitro fertilization. In response, Archbishop John Myers of Newark said he's aware of couples who have legally adopted a frozen embryo that had been abandoned in a fertility clinic and brought it to term. Would that possibility, Myers asked Naumann, be considered in the new document?

"My understanding is that the Holy See is reflecting on the issue of embryo adoption," Naumann responded. "We're hopeful that we will have guidance before we issue this document."

In pro-life circles, the issue of embryo adoption remains controversial. Some believe it should be encouraged in order to save embryos otherwise slated for destruction. Critics, however, contend that it amounts to participation in an immoral procedure. They also suggest that embryo adoption could encourage the creation of additional embryos.

In comments to *NCR*, Myers said he supports embryo adoption.

"I think it's saving a life, and doing it in a very moral way," Myers said. "It's saving an embryo from death, either by incineration or research."

Behind the Scenes

As is often the case with bishops' meetings, some of the most interesting action took place off-stage.

One such drama pivoted on a proposed "Pastoral Letter on Marriage" from the U.S. bishops, currently being prepared by the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, led by Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky. Marriage is one of five long-term priorities identified by the bishops in 2006, so in a sense the pastoral letter would represent a "charter document" for that initiative.

The current 47-page draft, which was discussed in a closed-door session in Orlando, represents the third version produced so far. Each succeeding draft, sources say, has attempted to respond to serious objections expressed by members of the Committee on Doctrine. Sources told *NCR* that during the closed-door meeting, Lori delivered a blunt message that the Committee on Doctrine is still not satisfied and warned that if the document were to come to the floor in its present form, resistance could be expected.

In general, sources told *NCR*, the objection is not that the draft expresses any specific doctrinal error, but rather that it relies too heavily on the social sciences at the expense of a systematic presentation of Catholic doctrine on marriage and the family. For example, the draft recommends natural family planning rather than artificial birth control, but is otherwise largely silent on Catholic moral teaching on issues such as in-vitro fertilization.

Defenders of the document argue that it attempts to strike a pastoral tone - one that realistically acknowledges the struggles of today's married couples, in a social context in which the idea of a lifetime commitment to anything is often a "tough sell."

Here's an illustrative instance: the current draft includes a brief section on what are presented as four typical stages in married life: "romance," "settling down," "power struggles," and "new beginnings." All four offer both challenges and blessings, the document says, and the trick is to read them in light of "Christ's own journey."

Critics worry that such passages amount to "baptizing" a particular theory borrowed from social sciences. It's not the sort of language, they say, that bishops as teachers of the faith ought to be using. Supporters, however, see the section as a laudable recognition of the realities of married life - not to mention, they say, that it echoes concepts which are standard fare in many Catholic ministries and outreach programs for married couples.

Given these divisions, it seems too early to say how things will shake out. Observers concur, however, that the current draft of the pastoral letter will not be the last.

A second behind-the-scenes tussle, again with bioethical overtones, concerned Catholic Relief Services, the official overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. bishops.

Last April, noted Catholic ethicist Germain Grisez published an article in Catholic World Report criticizing CRS policies on contraception. Specifically, Grisez cited a 2007 document called "CRS' Position on the Prevention of the Sexual Transmission of HIV," which, he said, contains an ambiguous distinction between promoting condoms and providing information about them. Grisez also challenged certain educational resources distributed by CRS (albeit without the CRS logo), such as a flip-chart based on materials from the World Health Organization. Not only does that flip-chart condone condoms, Grizes charged, but it counsels forms of sexual activity other than intercourse without considering their moral implications.

In response, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of Milwaukee, chair of the board for CRS, sent an April 23 letter to his fellow bishops insisting that "in no cases does CRS promote, purchase or distribute condoms," and that CRS' positions "are fully in keeping with conference policies." Privately, sources close to CRS said that Dolan moved quickly in part out of concern that perceptions of disobedience or doctrinal fuzziness could cut into the CRS donor base, at a time of burgeoning international need.

One cardinal told *NCR* in Orlando that he agreed with Dolan's response, quipping that Grisez's essay seemed to be a case of "Ready, Fire, Aim."

That sense, however, is hardly universal. In the wake of the dispute, the Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities decided to commission an internal critique of the CRS materials. A draft of that critique was discussed during a private session in Orlando and basically approved, though with requests for a bit of "fine-tuning." Once completed, the critique will be sent to Dolan.

Its gist, one source said, is that the CRS materials should be revised along the lines suggested in the Grisez essay. Further, there have been suggestions that CRS should present whatever revisions it adopts to the Committee on Doctrine before making them public.

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However the process unfolds, CRS appears likely to take the input seriously. Michael West, executive vice-president of CRS, pledged back in April that the group will take "appropriate action" based on what it hears from the doctrine and pro-life committees.

Around the Edges

It's campaign season in America, which means that the question of giving communion to pro-choice politicians is once again in the air - despite the fact that this time around, neither of the major party candidates for president is Catholic. While the bishops steered clear of the issue, it was obviously on the minds of various activist groups.

Pro-life activists led by Randall Terry, the founder of Operation Rescue, held a prayer vigil outside the bishops' meeting and placed an advertisement in the local paper. That ad carried the slogan "In Search of 12 Apostles," calling for just 12 bishops to have the "courage and clarity" to publicly announce that communion will not be given to pro-abortion candidates.

Among its bullet points was the following rhetorical question: "Should we vote for Herod after he slaughtered the Holy Innocents?"

In response, the left-leaning group "Catholics United" put out a press release condemning both the ad and the vigil, asserting that they "constitute a shameful attempt to use the Catholic sacrament of Communion as a political weapon."

At least one other activist group also had a presence in Orlando: Voice of the Faithful, which announced a petition to Benedict XVI asking that bishops who failed to respond to the sexual abuse crisis be held accountable. The group also called on the bishops to develop a national registry of abusers removed from ministry who remain priests.

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On June 6, Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore issued a series of directives to the Legionaries of Christ regarding their activities in the archdiocese. My story on the directives, along with an extended interview with O'Brien, can be found here: http://ncrcafe.org/node/1906 [3]

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Last week I was in Miami for the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Once again, reports can be found in the "Daily Updates" section elsewhere on this site: http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682 [1] .

The theme of this year's CTSA gathering was "Generations," reflecting the rise of a new cohort in the theological guild. Its members seem distinct in at least a couple of ways - ways that can be misread, observers caution, as ideological "conservatism" by those not paying close attention.

William Mattison of the Catholic University of America illustrates one such characteristic, which is an emphasis on the need for theologians to offer some basic faith formation before pressing onto sophisticated critique - reflecting their own experience, and that of their students, of never having imbibed a strong sense of Catholic identity from a subculture formed by interlocking neighborhoods, families and schools.

"One of the mantras of our teachers was, 'We do theology, not catechesis,'" Mattison told me. "While my peers recognize the difference, we also know you cannot do the former in any meaningful way in the absence of the latter."

Mattison added: "Our predecessors had that [formation], and perhaps did not recognize how it grounded them in their movement outward from the church to engage the world."

Jozef Zalot of the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati illustrates a second tendency, which is a distinct lack of appetite for internal ecclesiastical debates. In remarks to a panel on generational change, he called on theologians to promote "a more positive working relationship" with the bishops.

Zalot sees this stance as neither "liberal" nor "conservative." In fact, he seemed to suggest, that taxonomy is itself part of the problem.

"On one side we have the so-called 'liberals' (clerical and lay) who are wary, distrustful, and sometimes openly hostile to church hierarchy, and who see little or no possibility for collaboration with it," he said. "On the other side we have the so-called 'conservatives' (again, clerical and lay) who, while meticulously maintaining continuity with established church doctrine, render as heretical any attempt at respectful, critical questioning of magisterial teaching."

Zalot said such divisions prevent Catholicism from offering a unified witness on questions such as "individualism and relativism ? the war on terror, sexuality, medical research, immigration, the plight of refugees, [and] economic policy."

To be sure, the evidence from Miami suggests that stereotypes of younger Catholics as uniformly "conservative" or "traditional" miss the mark. For example, Maureen O'Connell, a recent Ph.D. at Boston College who is today an assistant professor of theology at Fordham, lamented what she described as the "infantilization of the most highly educated laity in history" by the hierarchy. In another context, Maria Teresa Davila of Andover Newton Theological School urged a "re-radicalization" of Latino/a theology, including a

more aggressive challenge to militarism and the "sacred cow" of capitalism.

If anything, listening to these younger scholars suggests a general note of caution about applying ideological labels to new Catholic realities, whether in the field of theology or anywhere else. In the end, those labels may turn out to reflect the experiences and thought world of a given generation rather than eternal verities.

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