

Bishops claim moral authority amidst widespread 'confusion'

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Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky. Nov. 17. He is chairman of the subcommittee that drafted the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on marriage. (CNS/Bob Roller)

BALTIMORE -- Responding to scientific advances and widespread "confusion" among their flocks, U.S. Catholic bishops on Tuesday, Nov. 17, issued detailed guidelines on marriage, reproductive technologies and health care for severely brain-damaged patients.

The bishops gathered here for their semi-annual meeting also heard a preliminary report on the "causes and contexts" of the clergy sexual abuse scandal that resulted in some 14,000 abuse claims and cost the church \$2.6 billion since 1950.

In other action the bishops approved the English translation and U.S. adaptations of five final sections of the Roman Missal; passed a \$144.5 million budget for 2010 for their bishops' conference; and heard a preliminary report on a study on causes and context of sexual abuse.

Watch the *NCR* web site for details on these actions.

Sex abuse

Researchers from New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice told the nearly 300 members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that homosexual orientation should not be linked to the sexual abuse, even as some church leaders have sought to make a link between gay priests and sexual abuse.

"What we are suggesting is that the idea of sexual identity be separated from the problem of sexual abuse," said Margaret Smith of John Jay College. "At this point, we do not find a connection between homosexual identity and the increased likelihood of subsequent abuse from the data that we have right now."

Since the abuse scandal erupted in the U.S. in 2002, the Vatican has barred seminarians with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies," and conducted an investigation of seminaries that concluded that "difficulties" related to "homosexual behavior" had been largely "overcome."

Noting the decline in accusations against Catholic priests, Bishop Blase Cupich of Rapid City, S.D., said the

report shows that "the worst of this is behind us ... I think it's safe to say that there is no safer place for a child today than in the Catholic church."

Karen Terry, the principal researcher, told the bishops that early findings confirm "a steep decline" in sexual abuse cases after 1985. The findings also show diocesan response to incidents of sex abuse have changed substantially over a 50-year-period, with an increase in administrative leave for accused abusers and a decrease in the number accused abusers reinstated.

The full study, commissioned by the bishops, is expected to be released in December.

While acknowledging some lingering damage from the abuse scandal, the bishops here have forcefully asserted their role as moral arbiters for the nation's 67 million Catholics. In fact, church members who seek independence from the Catholic hierarchy are "less than fully Catholic," Cardinal Francis George, the bishops' president, said Monday.

Challenging bishops

George's comments come as Catholics are deeply divided in a number of high-profile political issues -- including gay marriage, health care, and abortion -- and increasingly willing to publicly challenge their bishops.

"You only have to look at Congress, or any state in the country to see a number of Catholics who vote against the deeply rooted fundamentals of our faith," said Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J. "The fact that there is such very public confusion (on Catholic teaching) is a matter of deep concern for us."

Read more here [George questions role of independent Catholic media](#) [1] and here [Cardinal George and the politics of liturgy](#) [2]

Letter on Marriage

By a tally of 180 to 45, with three abstentions, the bishops approved a 57-page "pastoral letter" on marriage that largely restates traditional Catholic teaching on matrimony and family life, despite the concern voiced by some bishops about the document's pastoral tone and content.

Nearly 100 changes in two rounds of amendments preceded the 180-45 vote in favor of "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan." Two-thirds of the USCCB membership, or 175 votes, were required for passage of the document. There were three abstentions. Final approval came after an effort to remand the document to committee failed 56 to 169.

The bishops said "far too many people do not understand what it means to say that marriage -- both as a natural institution and a Christian sacrament -- is a blessing and a gift from God," the letter reads.

In particular, divorce, cohabitation, contraception and same-sex unions have been gaining acceptance among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, to the bishops' chagrin.

"One of the most troubling developments in contemporary culture is the proposition that persons of the same sex can `marry'," the bishops' letter reads. "This proposal redefines the nature of marriage and the family, and, as a result, harms both the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common good of society."

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Sullivan of Brooklyn unsuccessfully tried to strike portions of the letter that warn of dire consequences should same-sex marriage become widely accepted. "In general, [a] pastoral letter ought to restrict itself to the church's teaching, not arguing or emphasizing the `threats' of some sex relationships, most of which are not evidence-based," Sullivan wrote, according to a list of failed amendments

released by the bishops conference.

An effort by retired Archbishop Francis T. Hurley of Anchorage, Alaska, to remand the document to the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth for rewriting failed 56-169, with three abstentions.

Hurley said he had "nothing to offer in terms of changing a line here and there" but wanted to see the pastoral letter expanded in some areas, switched around in sections and rewritten to incorporate parts of "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), Pope Benedict XVI's recent encyclical.

But Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., chairman of the subcommittee that drafted the letter on marriage, strongly opposed the move, calling the document "worthy of giving us direction for the next three years." It is another component in the bishops' National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage, which began in November 2004.

A key change made in the letter during the amendment process was the rewriting of language describing cohabitation as "intrinsically evil."

Read more about the pastoral here: [Bishops OK marriage pastoral with many changes](#) [3]

In vitro fertilization denounced

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, who chairs the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, acknowledged "great confusion among lay Catholics regarding the church's teaching on human reproductive technologies."

"There is a need to help Catholics understand specific differences between the Catholic understanding and a secular understanding of human life," Rigali said. By a vote of 220-4, with three abstentions, the bishops approved a brief document aimed educating Catholics on why the church denounces in vitro fertilization, cloning and "other morally problematic techniques."

The chronically ill

Wading into another controversial area, the bishops approved by a vote of 219 to 4 revised guidelines for treating chronically ill and dying patients. The guidelines recall the fierce public debate over Terri Schiavo, the brain-damaged Florida woman who was in a persistent vegetative state for several years before her husband removed her feeding tube.

"As a general rule, there is an obligation to provide patients with food and water," even if the patient is in a "persistent vegetative state" and cannot take food orally," the bishops wrote.

The Roman missal

With overwhelming majority votes, the bishops approved translations of the proper of the saints, specific prayers to each saint in the universal liturgical calendar; the commons, general prayers for celebrating saints listed in the "Roman Martyrology"; the Roman Missal supplement; the U.S. propers, a collection of orations and formularies for feasts and memorials particular to the U.S. liturgical calendar; and U.S. adaptations to the Roman Missal.

Read more here [Bishops approve final translations of Missal](#) [4]

In other action Nov. 17, the bishops approved a \$144.5 million budget for 2010, representing an increase of less than 0.2 percent over 2009, and a 3 percent increase in the diocesan assessment to support the work of the USCCB in 2011. They also approved a priority plan titled "Deepen Faith, Nurture Hope, Celebrate Life" and a

series of "strategy and operational plans" for offices and departments of the USCCB for the next two years.

Late in the afternoon session, they began debate -- and were expected to vote -- on other action items given a preliminary presentation the first day of the meeting:

- Revisions to ethical and religious directives for Catholic health care facilities that would clarify that patients with chronic conditions who are not imminently dying should receive food and water by "medically assisted" means if they cannot take them normally.
- A document titled "Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology" that looks at the issue of reproductive technologies.

In electronic voting Nov. 17, the bishops elected chairmen-elect for five committees: Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis, Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations; Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond of New Orleans, Committee on Divine Worship; Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades, recently named to head the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth; and Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of San Antonio.

On Nov. 16, the first day of the meeting, the bishops heard a report on health care reform and reaffirmed as a body the statement that Cardinal Francis E. George, the bishops' president, had made soon after the House approved its version of reform legislation Nov. 7, expressing the bishops' commitment to keep health reform legislation in the Senate abortion-neutral.

A successful effort by USCCB leaders and staff members to press lawmakers to keep abortion out of the House's Affordable Health Care for America Act provides an example for the future, according to the chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

"It was a good example of how we as a conference can work together to have a positive influence on legislation," said Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., in a report to his fellow bishops. He spoke after the bishops gave their endorsement to the cardinal's statement.

The fact that House members knew the bishops wanted to see health reform succeed as long as it was abortion-neutral "allowed us to be heard in a number of different areas," the bishop added.

Earlier that day, in his presidential address, Cardinal George contemplated a scenario of what the church would look like without priests, framing his remarks in the context of the Year for Priests, currently being celebrated in the church through next June.

Without a priestly ministry rooted in holy orders, he said, the ministry of teaching about the faith would fall primarily to professors, "whose obligation is first to seek the truth in the framework of their own academic discipline and whose authority to teach derives from their professional expertise."

Without ordained priests, he said, "the church would be deprived of the Eucharist, and her worship would be centered only on the praise and thanksgiving."

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York delivered a report on the activities of Catholic Relief Services, which included a four-minute video. He praised CRS, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, for its "life-saving work."

The bishops also heard from Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the Vatican's nuncio to the United States, who cited several of Pope Benedict XVI's recent homilies and reflections on subjects ranging from the death of Pope Paul

VI to religious vocations and the qualities of a servant of the Lord.

He quoted from the pope's homily at a Sept. 12 ordination Mass for five new bishops, including a section in which Pope Benedict reflected on the characteristics of correct service in priestly and episcopal ministry -- fidelity, or faith, as the word translates in Greek, prudence and goodness.

"Fidelity is not fear, but rather is inspired by love and by its dynamism," said the pope, as quoted by Archbishop Sambi. "Faith demands to be passed on; it was not given to us merely for ourselves, for the personal salvation of our souls, but for others, for this world and for our time."

As to prudence, the pope said it demands "humble, disciplined and watchful reason that does not let itself be blinded by prejudices."

At a Mass opening the conference, Cardinal George talked about the dynamics of conversion, noting that the saints, in particular, lived lives of constant conversion.

"In considering personal change, in contemplating conversion, we ask ourselves: when does prudent accommodation become betrayal of principle?" he said. "And when does faithful devotion to principle become obstinacy? Perhaps the answer to those questions comes only from within the relation that binds us in intimacy to Christ himself."

Contributing to this story were Daniel Burke of Religion News Service; and from Catholic News Service: Patricia Zapor, Nancy Frazier O'Brien, and Mark Pattison in Baltimore.

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