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Villanova takes church management courses on road

Jerry Filteau | Jun. 8, 2011

Charles Zech (Hawaii Catholic Herald/Darlene Dela Cruz)

About 130 Hawaiian Catholic priests spent a good part of their five-day annual Priests? Convocation this May attending courses on church management by Philadelphia?s Villanova University -- in a resort town about 30 miles from Honolulu.

?It?s much more cost-effective for us to go to them than for them to come to us,? said Villanova?s Charles Zech, who led the program.

Instead of sending more than 80 percent of its diocesan and religious clergy across the Pacific to Pennsylvania for a week, the diocese brought Villanova to Hawaii.

It asked Pennsylvania?s oldest Catholic university, run by the Augustinians, to bring in teachers from the Center for the Study of Church Management to lead a series of 90-minute to three-hour modules during the yearly diocesan clergy gathering May 2-6 in Kahuku, a beach resort town near Honolulu.

Among sessions were three-hour courses on how pastors should deal with parish financial issues and with human resources -- the hiring, firing, promotion and development of the people, mainly laity, who play an increasing role in the dynamics of today?s Catholic parishes.

Jesuit Fr. William J. Byron, an economist and former president of Scranton University in Pennsylvania and The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., led a session on the spirituality of administration.

Zech, director of Villanova?s church management center and a specialist in church economics, led a session on how to develop parish councils and make them an effective part of collaborative parish leadership.

?It?s the wave of the future,? Zech told *NCR* regarding the road-show approach to teaching better management techniques to priests and other church leaders across the nation.

The center, part of Villanova?s School of Business, was formed in 2004 to offer more professional training in church administration and management to pastors and others involved in church administration.

Until recently, its two main components were a summer institute and a two-year master?s degree program, open to non-Catholic as well as Catholic administrators.

In the summer program, ?we have this church management institute that we run every year,? Zech said. ?We bring in folks from all over the country? for a week of intensive study on church management topics.

A couple of years ago, two priests from Hawaii participated in the program and afterwards tried to figure out how to spread what they learned to the rest of the priests in their state, he said.

They decided it would be far more cost-effective to bring a few Villanova teachers to the islands for a week than to send all their priests to Pennsylvania for a week, so they asked him to construct a program and presenters that could mesh with their annual Priests? Convocation, when almost all of Hawaii?s priests gather to share with one another on spiritual, pastoral and other issues.

Zech told *NCR* that Villanova?s Center for the Study of Church Management conducted a similar one-day session for priests of the diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., in March. It also recently entered into a partnership with the Camden, N.J., diocese just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, to improve the management skills of the priests of that diocese.

The summer program has 14 three-hour modules on various church management issues, he said, and the Wheeling-Charleston and Honolulu dioceses decided on which ones might be most beneficial to their priests.

In Hawaii, he said, ?we did spirituality of administration, parish stewardship, parish advisory councils, human resources and parish financial issues.?

In a separate session with Hawaiian chancery officials, he added, they did a session on ?chancery-parish relations,? addressing issues of how officials in diocesan offices should deal effectively with questions or problems raised by parish offices.

Other course modules the center offers, he said, include civil law, Web sites, social media, planning, facilities management, and marketing.

?Marketing may sound strange, but it?s very popular,? he said.

?The church is not a business, but we have a stewardship responsibility to use our resources as effectively as possible,? he said. ?Sometimes doing that requires some business management techniques -- but always in the context of the overall ministry.?

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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