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New profession of faith seen as 'public way of witnessing' to beliefs

Gretchen R. Crowe Catholic News Service | Jul. 16, 2012

ARLINGTON, Va. -- In a move that will go into effect Sept. 16, Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde has directed that a "profession of faith" declaring assent to all church teachings be made by all teachers of the faith, including catechists, youth ministers and religion teachers in the diocese.

The policy, announced in a letter to pastors and parochial administrators from Bishop Loverde dated May 10, stressed "the pressing need to hand on our Faith in an integral, comprehensive and clear way" and "the need to assure sound teaching in our catechetical programs" so that Catholic youths "truly be formed as authentic disciples of the Lord Jesus."

The profession contains the Nicene Creed; a declaration of belief in "everything contained in the word of God," whether written or handed down in church tradition; an affirmation to "accept and hold" what the church definitively teaches on faith and morals; and an affirmation to "adhere with religious submission of will and intellect" to the authoritative teachings of the pope and the bishops.

The last phrase, especially, sparked a response by a handful of local catechists in a story for The Washington Post July 11 -- as well as a commentary by Michael Sean Winters in the National Catholic Reporter -- who took umbrage with what they called the "fidelity oath."

But Father Paul deLadurantaye, Arlington's diocesan secretary for religious education and sacred liturgy, said the profession wasn't an oath at all, but "simply the profession of our faith, which all Catholics are called to do in different circumstances in life.

"The hope is that all teachers of the faith see church teaching as true and try to shape their lives to it," Father deLadurantaye said.

The church isn't looking for perfect people to teach catechesis, but rather for all teachers to have the desire to strive for complete understanding of the Catholic Church's teaching, he said, including issues such as contraception, reserving priestly ordination to men alone and traditional marriage. He sees the profession of faith as an opportunity for each teacher of the faith to evangelize not only outwardly, but inwardly.

"If I'm going to go out and proclaim the faith to others then I have to look within to say, 'Do I hold it? Do I believe it? Do I know what I believe? Am I ready to do this?" he said. "And if somebody does have a question, a concern, a difficulty, (the goal is) that they make a sincere and honest and sustained effort to try to overcome it."

The idea for implementing a diocesan-wide profession of faith came in part from Pope Benedict XVI's proclamation of the upcoming Year of Faith, beginning Oct. 11, and in part from a "grass-roots proposal" from a group of directors of religious education who already had implemented professions of faith at the parish level, Father deLadurantaye said.

This is "a public way of not only witnessing to the faith, but also providing an opportunity for other parishioners

to see men and women who generously step forward and give their time and energy, and who are saying this is what I believe and I'm going to teach it," he said.

There will be no diocesan level of enforcement regarding the signed professions, and the forms will be kept at the parishes. The Office of Catechetics will send out "an explanatory memo" clarifying what exactly is meant by the profession.

Susan Doyle, director of religious education at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Alexandria, said that while she "is prepared" for some level of difficulty from catechists, the profession is not all that different from an agreement she asks catechists to sign at the parish level when they are first interviewed.

"It's not exceptional, really, to have the idea that we promise to adhere" to church teaching, Doyle said. "There is an element, especially as catechists, of protecting and defending (the faith). We're talking about formation of souls, and we don't get to come up with our own Gospels or agenda."

She asks her catechists to tell her if they "prayerfully" feel that they can't teach a lesson so that she can step in and teach it instead.

"We have to be faithful," she told the Arlington Catholic Herald, the diocesan newspaper. "For all of us, believing is a continuum. It's something we struggle with."

But the key is that catechists "assent to accept the teachings and struggle to the best of (their) ability and to believe this with my will and intellect," she said. "But that has to be a sincere and genuine struggle."

Doyle said she has concerns the requirement will decrease an already small number of catechists and is already wondering if she'll have to pair grades for next fall's classes.

If any teacher of the Catholic faith does have difficulty signing or proclaiming the profession, Father deLadurantaye said he would encourage the catechist to "dialogue" with his or her pastor and "go from there." If there's a particular teaching that the catechist or youth minister finds difficult to accept, he encourages dialogue to get to the bottom of the issue.

"But in the end, it comes down to, 'This is what our faith is,'" he said, adding that it is "just a public proclamation of faith in word and a visible gesture. And that we are proud of what we believe."

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