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Bishops agree on need for better preaching, more penance

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During their annual fall general assembly Nov. 12-15 in Baltimore, the U.S. bishops voted down a document on the troubled U.S. economy, passed documents on penance and better preaching, approved a reorganization of their Communications Department and endorsed the sainthood cause of Dorothy Day.

Although the bishops discussed the economy, their document "The Hope of the Gospel in Difficult Times: A Pastoral Message on Work, Poverty and the Economy" did not gain the two-thirds vote required for passage Tuesday.

Some bishops criticized the document [1] after it was introduced Monday for being too long to be practical and for failing to include a variety of points and historical references.

On the assembly's second day, the bishops approved their first new document in 30 years on preaching. The document, "Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily," encourages preachers to connect the Sunday homily with people's daily lives.

The document was prepared by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, chaired by Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis, with subsequent review and comment by eight other USCCB committees.

When he introduced the document Monday, Carlson said preaching must be done "more effectively in the context of the new evangelization. ... Our people hunger for better preaching, preaching that would help them rediscover their faith."

Homilists, the document said, need to realize they are "addressing a congregation that is more culturally diverse than previously, one that is profoundly affected by the surrounding secular context and, in many instances, inadequately catechized."

The bishops also overwhelmingly approved -- in a 236-1 vote --an exhortation encouraging Catholics to take advantage of the sacrament of penance, or reconciliation.

The text was prepared by the bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, chaired by Bishop David L. Ricken of Green Bay, Wis. The exhortation, to be made available in pamphlet form, will aim to ease the fears of Catholics who have not gone to confession for some time.

It will be made public in time to allow for dioceses to prepare for Lent 2013.

The bishops approved a reorganization of their Communications Department that would include hiring a director of public affairs who would work to unify messages on the activities and stances of the USCCB -- not

individual dioceses or bishops -- and better carry out church campaigns related to new evangelization, according to New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, USCCB president.

The U.S. bishops, on a voice vote, endorsed the sainthood cause of Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who was famously quoted as saying, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily."

Dolan is promoting the cause of Day, whose Catholic Worker ministry was based in New York City. The cause was first undertaken by one of Dolan's predecessors in New York, Cardinal John O'Connor.

Dolan and other bishops who spoke Tuesday, including some who had met Day, called her sainthood cause an opportune moment in the life of the U.S. church.

The bishops also approved expanding the memorial for Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, a German-born Redemptorist priest who ministered throughout antebellum-era America for more than 20 years. Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi of Mobile, Ala., noted that Blessed Seelos ministered at a time when "immigrants were not welcomed well in many circumstances," which he said has contemporary significance.

The bishops were initially scheduled to consider a document titled "Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities for the Exercise of the Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop," developed by the Committee on Doctrine. The document urged bishops to take advantage of new technologies -- social media, blogging and cellphone technology -- to respond and explain church teaching when it is portrayed inaccurately, particularly by theologians.

Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, committee chairman, decided to withdraw the document in favor of a more comprehensive statement in line with the bishops' new communication plan and the ongoing work throughout the USCCB related to the new evangelization. The bishops agreed in a voice vote Monday to the appointment of a working group -- made up of the committee chairmen for doctrine, evangelization and catechesis, and canonical affairs and church governance -- to draft the document.

The bishops voted for a strategic plan that will guide the USCCB's work for the next four years, a "road map" to shape conference programs and activities to strengthen the faith of Catholics and help them actively live out their faith.

During the first year, the focus will be on faith and activities closely tied to the Year of Faith. In 2014 and 2015, initiatives will strengthen parish life and worship. The final year calls for Catholics to be witnesses to the wider world.

The bishops also approved a 2013 budget of $220.4 million and agreed to add a national collection for the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services. The budget for 2013 represents a 1.3 percent increase from 2012.

The new collection for the military archdiocese would begin in 2013. Under the plan, it would be taken voluntarily in parishes every three years. Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., USCCB treasurer, said the 2013 budget includes a surplus totaling more than $749,000. He also told the bishops that there was a projected surplus of $250,000 for 2014, meaning there was no need to seek an increase in the annual diocesan assessment for USCCB operations.

The bishops also approved a plan to add two staff members. One would serve in the National Religious Retirement Office and work directly with religious congregations. The second would be in the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity in the Church serving the Subcommittee on Native American Affairs.

Bishop Kevin J. Farrell of Dallas, chairman of the Committee on National Collections, and Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., chairman of the board of Catholic Relief Services, told of the progress being made in rebuilding the Catholic Church in Haiti nearly three years since a powerful earthquake devastated 20 percent of the country.

Farrell said 37 projects are under construction or being reviewed as part of the Partnership for Church Reconstruction in Haiti, or PROCHE, a collaborative effort of the USCCB, CRS and the Haitian church.

In his presidential address to open the assembly, Dolan told the bishops Monday they cannot engage culture, dialogue with others or confront challenges unless they first recognize their own sins and experience the grace of repentance.

The cardinal also said the sacrament of penance was something the USCCB planned to stress for all Catholics year-round with reflections on re-embracing Friday as a day of penance, including the possible re-institution of abstinence on all Fridays.

The bishops' assembly, which opened nearly a week after Election Day, included discussions about religious liberty and marriage.

Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, said the work of defending religious liberty would continue despite "setbacks or challenges."

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone, chairman of the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, said Election Day was "a disappointing day for marriage" which points to the need to "redouble our efforts."

In elections Monday, the bishops chose Farrell as treasurer-elect, chairmen-elect for five committees and CRS board members.

[Contributing to this report were Mark Pattison, Patricia Zapor and Dennis Sadowski in Baltimore and Carol Zimmermann in Washington.]

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