NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Bishops face the growing retirement crisis of religious orders

Jerry Filteau | Nov. 20, 2012
USCCB Fall 2012
Baltimore

Among the actions emerging from the U.S. bishops' annual fall assembly here, one that was least likely to garner any big headlines was their decision to add a new assistant director to the staff of the National Religious Retirement Office.

But behind it is one of the more dramatic human issues facing the U.S. church in coming years: a growing crisis in the many billions of dollars in unfunded retirement and elderly care costs that religious orders of men and women, especially women, are facing within the next couple of decades.

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. men and women religious today are age 70 or older, and 86 percent are 60 or older, said the report behind the proposal to expand staffing of the office. The office not only allocates funds from the yearly national collection for retired religious, but also provides extensive consultation services to help religious congregations prepare better for the funding crisis for aging members that so many of them face.

Other major actions the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops took during the two days of public business sessions of their Nov. 12-15 meeting in Baltimore include:

- **Penance**: They adopted an intentionally brief pastoral exhortation urging Catholics who have not gone to confession for a long time to return to the sacrament of reconciliation, or penance, this Lent and to begin again to experience the spiritual benefits of the sacrament, which many Catholics have abandoned in recent years. Left unresolved in the final vote was the exact phrasing of an amendment proposed by Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., reminding Catholics that their obligation to receive Communion at least once a year, preferably during Easter time, also entails going to confession beforehand if one is guilty of serious sins.
- **Poverty, work and the economy**: They rejected, after extensive debate, a proposed pastoral message on hope for Americans facing poverty, lack of work and other issues in the current economy. (**See story [1]**.)
- **Preaching**: They overwhelmingly adopted a statement, "Preaching the Mystery of the Faith: The Sunday Homily," that seeks to encourage better homilies and better homiletic formation for future deacons and priests.
- **Liturgy of the Hours**: They adopted a general work outline of what should be kept as is, what should be retranslated, or what should be dealt with in other ways over the next three to five years in a process aimed at producing an amended version of the Liturgy of the Hours in English for U.S. use.
- **Communications/public affairs**: They approved in broad outline a new communications strategy, not yet spelled out in detail, that would entail hiring a new national spokesperson or public affairs director for the bishops' conference and realigning Catholic News Service and other communications and publication operations of the conference, including more attention to new social media and contemporary communications technology. Some *NCR* sources expressed concern that a reference in the new strategy to forming a permanent editorial advisory board overseeing CNS, the world's largest editorially independent

religious news service, would constitute a return to censorship and an end to CNS's credibility and editorial independence over the last half-century, but none of the bishops commenting on the new strategy raised any questions about that as an issue.

- **Native Americans**: For the first time they added a full-time staff position devoted to Native American affairs as part of their Secretariat on Cultural Diversity in the Church, reflecting growing pastoral sensitivity to the Native American segment of the U.S. Catholic population.
- **Military archdiocese**: The bishops agreed to add a national collection for the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services. The new collection would begin in 2013, and it would be taken voluntarily in parishes every three years.
- **Immigration**: The bishops' Committee on Migration issued a statement Nov. 13 calling on President Barack Obama and Congress to "seize the moment" and pass a bipartisan immigration reform bill. Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez, committee chair, called on Obama and congressional leaders to work together on the issue.

The underfunded retirement and elderly care liabilities of U.S. religious orders and congregations are an urgent issue, the bishops were told. According to the most recent study conducted, only 7,692 U.S. men and women religious -- 14 percent -- are under the age of 60. It said 48,811 are 60 or older, and 34,631 of those are 70 or older.

It said 72 institutes -- 13 percent of orders or congregations of religious in the nation, with membership representing 11 percent of all religious in the country -- now "have a median age of 80 or higher."

The report added that "209 religious institutes (37 percent [of all the institutes in the country]) with 24,984 members (46 percent [of all men and women religious in the country]) have 40 percent or less of the amount they are projected to need for retirement costs."

The stark data in the report were only the latest alert to a problem that was already described as a pending crisis in the early 1970s, when members of Catholic religious institutes were first allowed to enter the Social Security system if their orders or congregations made back Social Security contributions to fulfill the system's minimum requirements to be eligible for benefits.

Since then, as actuarial and financial data accumulated, the dimensions of the crisis became ever more evident -- unfunded retirement/elderly care liabilities among religious, especially women religious who for decades had worked for a pittance in the nation's Catholic schools and other institutions, grew into billions of dollars.

The yearly national collection for retired religious, started in 1988, has made some dents in addressing the issue, collecting more that $30 million a year in recent years -- but that amount has not even begun to deal with the $20 billion in estimated religious retirement/old age liabilities that religious orders in this country are expected to face by 2023.

Roughly three out of every eight U.S. religious institutes today "have 40 percent or less of the amount they are projected to need for retirement costs," the report to the bishops said.

It said the additional staff member on the National Religious Retirement Office is urgently needed to help more religious institutes prepare for a future of growing retirement and elderly care costs with significantly reduced income as fewer and fewer members are able to earn regular salaries.

More

Complete reporting on the U.S. bishops' fall meeting [3]

[Jerry Filteau, *NCR* Washington correspondent, has reported on financial religious retirement issues in the United States since the early 1970s. His email address is jfilteau@ncronline.org.]

The Next Step FORWARD [4]

DONATE NOW [4]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [4]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/03/2015 - 19:59*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/bishops-face-growing-retirement-crisis-religious-orders

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/396201
[2] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[3] http://ncronline.org/NCRonline.org/featureseries/usccb-fall-2012
[4] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end