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Money, abuse and communion bans: U.S. bishops meet with Benedict

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 20, 2006 All Things Catholic

Bishop William Skylstad, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, was in Rome for biannual meetings between the officers of the U.S. bishops' conference and the Vatican. While here, he sat down for a wide-ranging interview with NCR Oct. 18 about issues facing the American church. Highlights of his comments include:

- In 2008, each bishop will likely again decide for himself whether to give communion to candidates at odds with church teaching. Skylstad does not expect additional Vatican instructions on the issue.
- More bankruptcies due to sexual abuse scandals cannot be ruled out, but the church is making "massive efforts" to protect children and young people.
- Restructuring in the bishops' conference could mean reduced American funding to the Vatican.
- Any text from Rome on the pre-Vatican II Mass should allow bishops to regulate its use, as opposed to the universal permission sought by traditionalists.
- The Vatican affirms Muslim/Christian dialogue in the United States.
- For now, a trip by Benedict XVI to the United States is tied to a visit to the United Nations.
- An anonymous letter attributed to New York priests attacking Cardinal Edward Egan is "suspicious."

Excerpts from the interview follow. The full text can be found in the Special Docuements section of NCRonline.org: Skylstad Interview [1]

NCR: You've come to Rome in a moment between the Regensburg crisis and the pope's trip to Turkey. What do you pick up about Islam?

Bishop William Skylstad: What the Holy Father presented in Regensburg caused a great deal of discussion, some of it supportive, some critical, but my impression is that he's determined that dialogue with Muslims must continue. ... We had a meeting today with Cardinal Paul Poupard [President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue], and he gave us a strong affirmation of what we're doing with regard to Catholic/Muslim dialogue in the United States. We have three major dialogues, one on the West Coast, one in the Midwest, and one on the Atlantic Coast. Cardinal Poupard told us that this work is very much appreciated by the Holy See, and he urged us to continue.

Any update on the possibility of a papal trip to the United States?

tThere's some discussion about the possibility of a trip to the United Nations, although it's still hard to say when that might take place. It's connected to the transfer of leadership in the UN, and will depend to some extent on who the next Secretary General is and what that person's ideas would be.

You see the possibility of Benedict coming to the United States as linked to a visit to the UN
I think so, at least initially.

In general terms, what have you discussed with the Vatican this week?

tOne important matter is the proposed restructuring of our conference ... [which] will probably mean some consolidation of offices, reduction in committees, and efforts of a similar nature. ... In the end, the aim is to be good stewards of resources, and to make sure that we're focused on our mission. One question is what the financial implications might be for the Holy See. If we cut the subsidies that dioceses pay to the conference, what will that mean for our canon 1271 contributions to the Holy See each year? Will it go down? It's something we have to sort out.

Looking ahead to the 2008 elections, do you expect you will be where you were in 2004 ? meaning that each bishop will decide for himself whether to give communion to candidates at odds with church teaching?

tI suspect that's the best we can do at this moment. There's obviously a great deal of sensitivity in this particular area. There's an ongoing need to clarify our expectations of a Catholic legislator, and we need to work that out in dialogue with people in political leadership.

Critics would say this creates the appearance of division and confusion. Isn't there an argument for trying to think as one body?

tIt's a complex situation. Each bishop has the responsibility for his own area, and it must be the individual bishop who makes decisions in specific instances. On the other hand, we obviously are connected in many ways as a church in the United States, and any decision made by one bishop can reflect upon the conference and on the entire church. ... I think we'll continue to have dialogue, but in the end we have to respect the particularities of each case.

Do you expect any further intervention from the Holy See?

tNo, I don't. Some have speculated about the possibility of something coming from the Vatican, but I have no indication that's the case.

Every time it seems we've turned a corner on the sexual abuse crisis, another diocese files for bankruptcy or another scandal erupts. Is there an end in sight?

tWe will always be dealing with this issue to some extent. We have to be very careful about saying, 'This is over.' ... I would say that our effort to [protect children and young people] well has been massive ? our "Safe Environment" campaign, for example, or the auditing we're doing. ... All this has required a huge, huge commitment, but I pick up from bishops that we have to do what it takes. ... But the system will never be perfect, no matter how hard we try.

Will there be additional bankruptcies of dioceses?

tYou can't rule it out ... It just depends on how the financial picture unfolds, on what the levels of future settlements may be. We have to deal fairly with victims, but at the same time we must preserve our mission as church. I think the recent decision in Davenport to file for bankruptcy, for example, was their way of addressing both of these issues.

What are your thoughts about wider use of the pre-Vatican II Mass?

tWe're a church of unity and of common worship. The thrust of Vatican II calls for more active participation on the part of the faithful in the liturgy itself, and from my standpoint trying to move further in that direction would be most helpful. On the other hand, the Holy Father is trying to reconcile with the Lefebvrite group, whose members have an attachment to the older Mass. To date, those efforts have not been successful, but we are always in the business of reconciling, healing and unifying. Perhaps some further accommodation can be found. ... The bishop has to decide when and where it will be pastorally effective.

So you would not want a 'universal indult' that doesn't require approval from the bishop?

tI would hope that somehow there would be this encouragement or directive that the local bishop is able to make decisions about the liturgical life of his diocese.

What was your reaction to the anonymous letter attributed to New York priests critical of Cardinal Edward Egan?

tThe fact that it's anonymous makes it somewhat suspicious. ... It's really important to work in and through the structures that exist to change what needs to be changed.

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