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U.S. bishops set to meet with young theologians

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 12, 2013
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The U.S. bishops' committee known in recent years for criticizing several prominent American theologians is bringing together 14 bishops and a select group of younger members of the theological field in a three-day meeting this week.

The meeting, sponsored by the U.S. bishops' doctrine committee and the Knights of Columbus, is part of a multiyear effort on the part of the bishops to encourage dialogue with theologians. Even so, attendance is open only to academics selected by the bishops.

Additionally, the heads of the two major U.S. theological societies, the Catholic Theological Society of America and the College Theology Society, told *NCR* they were unaware of the meeting and did not know how the bishops selected the invitees.

The meeting is being held Thursday through Saturday at Washington's Blessed John Paul II Shrine, formerly known as the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center. The meeting will focus on the interplay of the roles of catechesis and theology in what Pope Benedict XVI termed a new evangelization effort for the church.

While details of the event have not been made public, *NCR* obtained a copy of the agenda and of a separate list of some of the attendees from a person not associated with the bishops' conference.

According to the attendees' list, bishops planning to attend the event include Archbishop John Nienstedt of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the current chair of the bishops' doctrine committee, and Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who headed that committee from 2009 to 2012.

Wuerl is scheduled to give an address Thursday night on "Catechesis and Theology in the Service of the New Evangelization."

Requests to Nienstedt's spokesperson Wednesday for the archbishop's comment on the meeting were not returned. Spokespersons for Wuerl said the cardinal had a tight schedule and was unavailable for comment.

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the bishops' conference, said the event was part of an "overall effort to build relationships between bishops and theologians."

"Among the goals are to build relationships among the academic societies and to explore current theological issues, especially the intellectual task of the new evangelization," she said.

One qualification for attendance at the event, Walsh said, was that a theologian must have obtained a doctorate degree in the last five years. She said those attending the meeting were selected by bishops' conference staff after an open invitation was made on the conference's website [2].

Walsh said she did not know whether that invitation was announced publicly or how specific applications were approved or denied.

Richard Gaillardetz, a theologian at Boston College who heads the 1,400-member Catholic Theological Society of America, said it was "encouraging that the bishops are reaching out to a new generation of theologians and laying the groundwork for a more productive relationship between bishops and theologians for decades to come."

But Gaillardetz also said he was disappointed his theological society had not been involved.

"The question that I would have has to do with who's invited and who's not, who determines who's invited and who's not," said Gaillardetz, who is the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College.

"And it is mildly disappointing to me that the bishops don't want to work in conjunction with any number of respected professional societies to help make sure that they receive an interesting cross-section [of theologians] from different teaching contexts and different theological orientations in order to further enrich the conversation," he said.

Walsh said while the bishops meet with the leaders of the theological membership societies during the year, the bishops wanted this week's event to be "zeroing in on the younger people."

Jesuit Fr. Peter Ryan in May became head of the U.S. bishops' secretariat for doctrine, which carries out the work of the nine-member doctrine committee. He succeeds Capuchin Fr. Thomas Weinandy, who had served in the role since 2005. Ryan did not return calls about the theology conference.

The focus on the intersection of catechesis and theology represents a dynamic that sometimes causes tension between bishops and theologians. At question is whether the academics, who teach college-level courses and publish in scholarly journals, should be primarily responsible for teaching the basics of the Catholic faith.

The bishops' doctrine committee has issued public rebukes of five prominent U.S. theologians since 2005. In several of those criticisms, it said the theologian in question could have caused some confusion over the church's official teachings.

In what seemed to be a response to the bishops' concerns, several of the addresses [3] at this year's annual meeting of the College Theology Society, which numbers about 900 members, focused on how theologians have to pursue both theological inquiry and catechetical instruction.

The bishops had a similar meeting with younger theologians in fall 2011 titled "Intellectual Tasks of the New Evangelization." Attendance then also was by invitation only and was limited to theologians who had just begun teaching and had not yet attained tenure.

One theologian who participated in the earlier event, Christie Billups, an assistant professor of theology at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill., told *NCR* [4] afterward that the bishops "need to make the forum open enough -- and safe enough, frankly -- for theologians of all stripes and perspectives to say what they truly think and feel. And I don't believe that that happened."

Other bishops set to attend this year's meeting include Chicago Cardinal Francis George; Baltimore Archbishop William Lori; Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron; Toledo, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Blair; Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Daniel Flores; and Buffalo, N.Y., Bishop Richard Malone*.

Flores is also set to speak at the event. His talk is to focus on "Catechesis/Theology: The Bishop and the

Theologian."

Besides Wuerl and Flores, four theologians are scheduled speakers: Mary Healy, an associate professor of sacred scripture at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit; Khaled Anatolios, a professor of historical theology at Boston College; John Cavadini, a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame; and John Grabowski, an associate professor of moral theology at The Catholic University of America.

The bishops have also set aside time during the event for two eucharistic celebrations and more than two hours of formal discussion.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified Malone's diocese.*

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