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Groups urge US bishops to speak on poverty, build 'church for the poor'

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Two Catholic nonprofit groups urged Monday that the U.S bishops, meeting here for their annual assembly, follow the lead of Pope Francis in building a "church for the poor" in the United States.

Specifically, the groups said, the American prelates could make their national office a "bishops' conference for the poor" by drafting a new statement on the continuing economic crisis and by launching a nationwide poverty awareness campaign.

That campaign, they said, could follow a similar game-plan as the bishops' focus over the past two years on issues of religious liberty, which the bishops devoted significant time and energy to in 2012 and 2013, hosting twice a "Fortnight for Freedom" centered around the implementation of the health care law.

The Catholic Democrats and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good made the call for the focus on the poor Monday, holding a press conference at which they released an open letter [1] they are sending to each of the ten bishop candidates to be elected president at this year's assembly.

"Millions of our brothers and sisters are being left behind ... it has become the new normal," said Steven Krueger, head of the Catholic Democrats, at the press conference.

"[We] are prayerfully urging the U.S. bishops to address an agenda that once again excludes poverty to follow the hope, focus and leadership of Pope Francis in creating a church for the poor," he said.

The bishops are meeting [2] in Baltimore for their annual plenary assembly Monday-Thursday. As part of the meeting, they will elect a new president to replace New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who is finishing his three-year term in the role.

The call by the two Catholic organizations comes the same day some 50 prominent Catholic leaders -- including former U.S. ambassadors to the Vatican, retired bishops, and former bishops' staffers -- published a letter [3] in *The Baltimore Sun* calling on the prelates to firmly support their initiatives fighting domestic poverty.

Those leaders urged the bishops to "stand strong" in their support for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), an initiative of the bishops' conference that since 1969 has provided grants to institutions and projects across the country aimed at helping the economically disadvantaged.

In recent years, bishops in several dioceses have pulled funding from the program after groups like the American Life League alleged some funds funneled through the initiative went to projects at odds with Catholic doctrine. The program maintains that all projects are funded in manners consistent with Catholic moral teaching.

Among the signers of the second letter are retired Las Cruces, N.M., Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, a former chair of the CCHD; former Vatican ambassadors Thomas Melady and Miguel Diaz; Leadership Conference of Women Religious president St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn; and Sr. Pat McDermott, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.

"CCHD advances the Church's mission to defend human dignity precisely by building diverse coalitions that have led to living wages for workers, quality health care, better schools and stronger communities," the signers write.

"We urge you to resist this pressure and redouble your commitment to social justice ministries that lift people out of poverty," they continue. "We can affirm the Catholic identity of CCHD without backing away from essential partnerships."

"In the words of Pope Francis, let us have the courage to 'take to the streets' and become a 'poor church for the poor,'" the signers conclude.

The public agenda for the U.S. bishops' meeting this year does not include [2] any focus on poverty or economic issues. A proposed pastoral statement from the bishops on the economy at last year's plenary assembly failed to garner the necessary two-thirds vote for approval.

Failure of that statement came after several bishops, including former bishops' conference president Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, critiqued the statement on the floor of the 2012 meeting. Fiorenza said it would be "lampooned" in the Catholic academic world because it failed to reference the long history of Catholic teaching on issues like workers' rights to unionize and to lobby for just wages and working conditions.

"If the U.S. bishops cannot issue a strong, unambiguous statement advocating for the poor at this time, when will they?" Krueger asked at his press conference.

Lack of any action on social justice issues at this years' assembly, the two non-profit groups wrote in their letter Monday, "has made many ask: what is to become of the Catholic Social Justice Tradition"?

"In order for our economy to serve the needs of people and not the other way around, unambiguous moral leadership -- like that of Pope Francis -- is needed to shape economic policy and budgets as moral documents at this critical juncture in the life of our nation and Church," the groups state.

Ending their letter, they urge the bishop candidates to "prayerfully consider" following five steps if they are elected the bishops' president:

- "Follow the hope, focus, and leadership of Pope Francis" in his presidency;
- Make clear advocating for the poor is a "pastoral priority" of the U.S. bishops by striving to make their national office a "bishops' conference for the poor," as Pope Francis has called for a "church for the poor."
- Advocate for consideration of a new bishops' statement on the economy at their next gathering, held in June 2014;
- Launch a nationwide poverty awareness campaign, "similar to the religious liberty campaign that was conducted in 2012."

Fr. Raymond Kemp, a priest of the Washington archdiocese who is nationally known for his work on poverty issues, also spoke at the groups' press conference Monday, asking them to "build up a family of faith that seeks first the kingdom of God and God's justice for all of creation."

"Let's go with Pope Francis and the Gospel, good Bishops," said Kemp, who directed a program at the Woodstock Theological Center called *Preaching the Just Word* and has served on various boards in the D.C. area.

"Our young and our old and all of us in between know the church is at its best when we serve and advocate God's good will for all creation," he said.

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