

## US bishops open assembly by voting to stay the course

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The nation's Catholic bishops during their annual summer assembly voted to stay the course they have set for themselves over the last several years, focusing on issues of religious liberty, same-sex marriage, and participation in the U.S. political sphere.

In one of only three public deliberations at the event, the prelates voted to renew their efforts in addressing concerns over religious liberty, granting another three-year term to a special bishops' committee organized on the issue.

The bishops are gathered in New Orleans until Friday for their spring meeting, one of two annual plenary assemblies of the U.S. bishops' conference.

Going into the event, many analysts and even some bishops had asked if the prelates would be reorienting their work around the new emphases of Francis' first year as pope, particularly his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), and his pastoral tone.

Yet in three and a half hours of open discussion on 17 topics Wednesday, the bishops focused more on old business than new -- hearing updates from the lay group that advises them on preventing sexual abuse of minors, Catholic Relief Services, and the bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

The lack of focus on other issues drew criticism from at least one of the bishops in the room on the first day.

"There's a lot of pastoral issues that we should be talking about that we're not talking about," he said, speaking on background before the start of the first session of the meeting.

The mostly lay group responsible for advising the bishops on their work throughout the year also asked the prelates Wednesday to reconsider their focus. The chairman of the 48-member National Advisory Council said the group was "very much in agreement" that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops should take on Francis' call for the church to act as a field hospital.

The chairman, Fernando Montemayor, said the church should "re-examine how it reaches out to those experiencing brokenness" and work for "more dialogue and greater acceptance, rather than what is commonly perceived as judgment."

In the one unscheduled moment of the first day's session, the bishops' conference president, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., asked them to endorse a letter to Francis, inviting him to visit the United States for the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. The bishops endorsed the letter.

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia has been pushing for months for the pope to attend the event, which

could draw an estimated 15,000 families to the city without the pope, he told *NCR*. If Francis makes the trip, Chaput said more than 1 million people could attend. In remarks to the bishops Wednesday, Chaput said he had "good reason" to believe Francis would attend. In a brief interview, Chaput would not elaborate on his reasoning.

The bishops approved a new term for their Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty by unanimous voice vote Wednesday. Headed by Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, the committee was first organized in 2011 by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, then president of the conference. Its work has focused heavily on a federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans.

Documents provided to the bishops explaining the work of the committee said it needed to be renewed because its concerns "have persisted and even intensified" and "that ceasing the effort would send a bad message to the faithful and to our opponents in this area."

### **'Faithful Citizenship'**

The bishops also voted unanimously to approve changes to a document addressing Catholics' participation in the U.S. political sphere. Known commonly as "Faithful Citizenship," the document has been issued in some form every presidential election year by the bishops' conference since 1976.

In 2011, the last time it came up for renewal, the bishops reissued the document they had written in 2007 with updated introductory remarks.

While responsibility for drafting "Faithful Citizenship" had in past years rested with the bishops' committees on domestic and international issues, this year, a special working group was created to reconsider the document. The bishops' assembly voted to allow another committee, to be named by Kurtz, to redraft the introductory remarks and to make some changes to the 2007 document.

"Members [of the working committee] noted that the document had become dated in certain important aspects," Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, chair of the working committee, told the assembly.

"For example, the document emphasizes some policy issues that have diminished in importance or even disappeared since 2007, while addressing lightly or not at all policy issues that have come to great prominence since then, such as religious liberty and the redefinition of marriage," said DiNardo, the archbishop of Galveston-Houston.

The changes are to be approved by the full bishops' assembly in November 2015.

Asked in an interview following the vote if issues like immigration reform or gun control would have a place in the revisions, DiNardo told *NCR* he could see them given a more prominent placement in the document or fitted into the new introductory note.

While he didn't want "to lose sight" of pro-life issues the bishops have always addressed, DiNardo said, "I do want to make sure that there is some element, as Pope Francis has made very clear, that in the world at large, the poverty question is really significant, and part of it is structural and not just individual poverty."

Outside the assembly hall, one former conference president said he hoped the committee editing the document would be "limited" in their alterations.

"I just hope they don't change it too much," said retired Galveston-Houston Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza, who led the conference from 1998 to 2001.

On the floor of the assembly during discussion about the document, San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop Robert

McElroy suggested it needs "deep changes" in its understanding of the notion of intrinsic evil in order to address Francis' focus structural sin.

## **Family synod**

Kurtz also addressed the bishops about the upcoming worldwide meeting of bishops at the Vatican in October. The Synod of Bishops is the first of two called by Francis to be held in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Both will focus on the theme "pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization," but the first will be attended only by representatives of global bishops' conferences, like Kurtz.

Kurtz presented what he called a "general review" of responses by U.S. Catholics to a questionnaire sent by the Vatican's office of the Synod to Bishops globally. The questionnaire asked how Catholics perceive the church's family pastoral practices on issues like contraception and marriage.

"Unsurprisingly, we still have much ground to cover in sharing the good news of marriage and the family with our Catholic faithful," Kurtz said.

"We know there is a need for greater, effective teaching on key tenets of the faith, such as the indissolubility of marriage, the importance of sexual difference for marriage, the natural law, and the married couple's call to be open to life," he said.

The Vatican synod office is using the responses to the questionnaire to write a working document that will guide discussion at the synod. Kurtz said that working document is nearly complete and should be distributed to bishops soon.

The synod has raised hopes that Francis may be considering a change in the church's pastoral practices in a number of areas, particularly regarding the admittance of divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion.

Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who serves on a 15-member council of bishops that advise the Vatican synod office, also spoke about the upcoming meeting with comments from the floor of the bishops' assembly.

One "big difference" with the synod now, Wuerl said, is that Francis personally attends its meetings.

"He has spent a total of six hours over two days with us every time we meet," Wuerl said. "It's clear that he wants to be engaged in the development."

"Our Holy Father has made it clear that this is a process," Wuerl continued. "A process of listening ... invoking the Holy Spirit in guiding us as we go forward."

The U.S. bishops also heard reports at their assembly from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, apostolic nuncio to the U.S.; Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family; and San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, chair of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

Pointing to the recent string of state same-sex marriage bans struck down by federal judges, Cordileone said the country was at a "critical point."

"An amendment to the U.S. Constitution is the only remedy in law against judicial activism," he said.

The San Francisco archbishop also announced he would be attend the second annual March for Marriage in Washington, D.C., June 19. The march is organized by the National Organization for Marriage, a group

advocating for legal recognition for marriage as only between one man and one woman.

The bishops' meeting continues Thursday morning with one more 2.5-hour open session with two presentations: one on the new evangelization and poverty, the other on marriage and the economy.

The first presentation will be made by Helen Alvaré, a law professor at George Mason University who also serves as a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Laity. The second will be made by W. Bradford Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia who directs the university's National Marriage Project.

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