

Unnecessary defensive mood could permeate bishops' modified 'Faithful Citizenship'

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At their spring meeting this week in New Orleans, the U.S. bishops decided they would modify their most recent statement on political responsibility but not totally rewrite it.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops have issued these statements prior to presidential elections since 1976. The most recent document, "[Faithful Citizenship](#) [1]," was written in 2007 but was left unchanged prior to the 2012 election because of disagreements among the bishops over what they should say.

The USCCB president, Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., explained that he offered three options to the USCCB administrative committee: doing nothing; keeping the 2007 document and writing a new introductory note, as they did in 2011; or rewriting the document completely.

"Some of the policy issues that are discussed in the [2007] document either have diminished or disappeared," he explained. "Other issues have since emerged as important and they have not been meaningfully addressed." In addition, he noted, "the 2007 document does not take into account the later magisterium of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI or anything of the teachings of Pope Francis."

The members of the administrative committee preferred something between proposals two and three. "The idea is to issue a new introductory note, reissue the 2007 document but also allow for some limited revision of the 2007 document," he said. The bishops accepted this proposal with what appeared to be a unanimous voice vote.

It was not clear what changes would be made in the document. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston explained that his working group was simply responsible for coming up with the proposed process, not doing the actual work. President Kurtz will appoint a new working group to do the work for presentation to the bishops at the November 2015 meeting.

Judging from everything else that happened at the meeting, it is probable that the changes will emphasize the bishops' concerns about gay marriage and religious liberty.

Auxiliary Bishop Robert McElroy of San Francisco noted that the treatment of conscience in the 2007 document was very good, but he complained that "the role of intrinsic evil has a centrality" that needs to be "supplemented by an examination and presentation of the church's doctrine on structural sin and structural evil and the pursuit of the good." Otherwise, "the teachings of Pope Francis will not be correctly presented."

Cardinal DiNardo clearly disagreed. "The major point of many of the committee writers was that that section of the document was the one that was strongest and therefore to be left alone," he said.

Later at the press conference, the cardinal was asked whether the new draft, like Pope Francis, might de-emphasize abortion in favor of concern for the poor. "It is not so much saying that we will do less with

abortion," he responded, as "we want to make sure that we speak very insistently about the role of poverty, about the economy and what happens in those issues. But they would not take away from our very significant commitment to human personal life. It is not negotiable."

On Thursday, the last day of public sessions, the bishops [heard presentations](#) [2] on "The New Evangelization and Poverty" by Helen Alvaré, professor of law at George Mason University, and on "Marriage and the Economy" by W. Bradford Wilcox, professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

Alvaré's talk could have more accurately been titled "Evangelization and Charity," a phrase she used a number of times. She never spoke of justice, only charity, as if evangelization and justice have nothing to do with each other.

In addition, she stretched the meaning of "the poor" to include atheist J-Ax, the multimillionaire rapper who coached [the Italian singing nun](#) [3]. When everyone becomes part of the poor, the term becomes meaningless.

She also told a story about a group of women religious at the beach who, because they were in religious garb, were approached by teenage girls who talked with them about the problem of sexual promiscuity at their high school.

Fine. Good for them. What I found objectionable was her reference to them as "nuns on the beach," a clear dig at [Nuns on the Bus](#) [3]. If she and the bishops do not understand that the Nuns on the Bus are some of the best evangelizers in the church today, then they don't understand evangelization at all.

I was expecting the worst from Professor Wilcox because of [his op-ed in the Washington Post](#) [4]. In fact, I was impressed.

He laid out the data showing that the upper class (as measured by education) has more stable marriages than the lower and middle classes. This marriage gap was minimal 50 years ago. He noted that liberals use economic conditions to explain the problems of poor families while conservatives stress cultural and policy reasons. His conclusion, with which I agree, is that both are right.

A balanced approach was shown when he described the tasks of the church as not only preaching the benefits of intact marriages but also being a voice for economic justice in the public square.

Where the bishops go with all this remains to be seen. Right now, they feel besieged by their opponents in the culture wars. They worry -- and this is a legitimate worry -- that their opponents will use governments to force them out of charity work by requiring actions they feel are contrary to their values. This defensive mood may well permeate the changes they make in "Faithful Citizenship."

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