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Pittsburgh priests to bishop: Listen to laity on contraception

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Bishop David A. Zubik of Pittsburgh addresses the Catholic Media Convention in Pittsburgh on June 23, 2011. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

Several priests of the Pittsburgh diocese have met with Bishop David Zubik -- the prelate who said in January that the Obama administration's mandate regarding coverage of contraceptives in health care plans told Catholics, "To Hell with you" -- telling him his stance on the issue was alienating women and creating "a lot of anger" among laypeople.

The meeting took place in mid-March between four priests and the bishop and lasted about two hours. *NCR* learned of the meeting Monday through a fax sent from the Association of Pittsburgh Priests, an area group known to accept women and married men into its ranks.

The meeting was "cordial" and Zubik "took the time" to listen to many of the priests' views, Fr. Neil McCaulley, one of the four priests, told *NCR* in a telephone interview. He also said the bishop had agreed to meet in the future with groups of women and laypeople to hear their views on the matter.

Speaking to *NCR* on Tuesday, Zubik said the meeting was amicable and that he wanted to meet with the priests because "it's important for me to be able to respond" to their concerns.

The bishop also said he is open to meeting with laypeople. "I think that as many people as possible need to hear from me" on the issue, he said.

Zubik's January column, published in the *Pittsburgh Catholic* newspaper, caught the eye of some in the church for its strident tone on the issue of the health care mandate.

"The Obama administration has just told the Catholics of the United States, 'To Hell with you!' There is no other way to put it," the bishop bluntly wrote in the column, which was printed following the administration's first announced version of the mandate in late January.

That version of the mandate garnered protest from a wide range of Catholic groups -- including the U.S. bishops' conference, NETWORK and Catholic Charities USA -- who said it didn't include an appropriate exemption for religiously affiliated employers opposed to artificial means of contraception.

Since then, the administration has sought compromises in implementing the mandate. In February, President Barack Obama made a televised announcement of an accommodation for religiously affiliated employers that he said would ensure they didn't have to pay for contraceptive coverage.

In mid-March, the administration announced a "proposed rulemaking" and opened a 90-day public comment period.

According to a Catholic News Service report Tuesday, an internal memo from the bishops' conference released to the news agency said the contraceptive mandate "remains radically flawed."

McCaulley, who is retired after serving 46 years as a parish priest in the Pittsburgh area, said the idea for the meeting with Zubik first came as members of his group talked with others and decided "we owed it to the people ... of the church to let the bishop know that not everybody out there agrees with the bishops."

Pointing to a number of studies that show that about 90 percent of Catholics don't follow the church's official teaching on birth control, McCaulley said the group thought that since the bishop is "always willing to meet with priests," they could raise the issue with Zubik and ask him to meet with laypeople, as "we didn't feel competent to speak on women's issues."

Zubik said he replied to the priests' request that he meet with laypeople with, "'Why wouldn't I?'"

Pointing to a series of sessions he plans to host in each of the diocese's four vicariates, the bishop said he is will also meet with members of the diocese on a larger scale, "so that we can really listen to each other."

Those meetings, the bishop said, will also include a historical presentation on the issue of religious freedom in the United States.

At the beginning of his interview, Zubik first said he wanted to offer a "clarification" about the Association of Pittsburgh Priests, which came into some controversy in 1999, when it withdrew its membership from the National Federation of Priests' Councils, claiming the national body was too passive.

The title of the group, Zubik said, "is not reflective of what that organization is."

"As a matter of fact, the majority of people who belong to it are laypeople; they don't come under the umbrella of the church at all," he said. "I have to say that over the years it has a caused a great deal of confusion among people who think that they represent the priests. They don't."

Asked what he might say to a Catholic woman who had attempted to follow the church's official teaching on contraception but had found it painful or difficult to do so because of health or other reasons, the bishop would only say that he thinks "that really is an issue that's between a confessor and a penitent."

Saying he would "rather not want to mix that in" to the discussion of the mandate, Zubik said, "I think if we're going to address religious liberty issues, then we have to stay focused on what the issue is."

"Maybe we need to be able to do a better job of adult faith formation around the church's teaching on contraception, but what this issue is about is religious freedom," he said. "It's about religious liberty, which is guaranteed by the first amendment of the Constitution."

Zubik said he was unsure of where discussions on the mandate between the administration and staff members of the U.S. bishops' conference were. While the bishop said he knew bishops' conference staff members were meeting with the White House weekly, he hadn't seen anything official from the administration.

Zubik said he thought any comment on that process "has to come from the [bishops' conference], because they are engaged on the discussion and they know what is being brought up around the table."

Regarding whether he thought the tone of his January column impeded discussions with the administration, Zubik would only say, "That's exactly what I felt that the government said to us when I heard about the announcement."

"I don't want attention to be focused on the use of the word Hell as much as I want it be on what it feels to be dismissed," the bishop said. "And I think that's the issue."

"We haven't been heard. The issue is now we're being told not only do we not hear you, but that you're going to have to violate your own beliefs."

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