

World & Nation

Bishops face agenda packed with proposals, reports

Washington (NC) — The U.S. bishops faced an agenda crowded with a dozen or more "action items" as they opened their fall general meeting Monday, Nov. 16, in Washington, D.C.

Items on which the bishops were expected to vote later in the week ranged from a proposed statement on Central America critical of some Reagan administration policies in the region to consideration of a 1988 budget for the NCCB and its public policy arm, the U.S. Catholic Conference.

Throughout the week the bishops also were to be briefed on such items as the conclusions of the October 1-30 world Synod of Bishops in Rome on the laity.

Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), opened the four-day bishops' meeting by commenting that Pope John Paul II's September visit to the United States disproved critics who thought the visit would be greeted by massive protests or indifference.

Those who said the pope was coming "to scold us" or that his talks would be "irrelevant and insensitive" were also proven wrong, Archbishop May said. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

A proposal to improve bishop-theologian relations and resolve disputes over theological or doctrinal matters ran into opposition on the meeting's first day as Archbishop Francis J. Stafford of Denver said he found the document, "lacking" theologically.

Archbishop Stafford also complained that "the bishops as a whole have only seen the

document in the last month" — a time he thought too short because the issues treated "are so central" to church life today.

The document, titled "Doctrinal Responsibilities: An Approach to Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Disputes Between Bishops and Theologians," for full debate and a vote on the meeting's final day, November 19.

The "Doctrinal Responsibilities" statement, Archbishop Stafford said, "is similar in importance and substance" to the pastoral letters on the economy and on war and peace, which went through several phases of drafting and consultation with all the bishops before they were presented for a final vote.

Archbishop Edmund C. Szoka of Detroit also questioned the quality of the document and asked why the bishops were voting on it when its recommendations were only optional guidelines, not binding rules. "This could lead to great misunderstandings," he said.

Bishop Raymond W. Lessard of Savannah, Ga., chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Doctrine which prepared the document, told a press conference after the bishops' initial session that the criticisms could "possibly" lead to delaying a vote on the document until a later date.

He said it was too early to predict what the bishops would want to do with the document, however.

Bishops raised few questions in response to the November 16 presentation of a proposed new marriage rite for ecumenical weddings. If approved by two-thirds of the bishops and the Holy See, the rite would become an option alongside existing rites for marriage between a Catholic and a non-Catholic Christian.

Included in the new rite are optional opening rites that restore ritual elements once used in Catholic rites and still common in non-Catholic churches.

These are questions to the congregation and the couple right after the greeting, a public declaration of the couple's intention to wed, and an affirmation of that declaration by the families and congregation.

The text of the new rite, intended for ecumenical marriages celebrated outside Mass, was developed by the North American Consultation on Common Texts in an effort to meet what it called "an increasingly common pastoral situation" of marriages involving Christians of different ecclesial traditions.

The main elements of the proposed new rite are an opening ceremony of greeting, declaration of intent to marry and a prayer, a Liturgy of the Word with Scripture readings, the exchange of marriage vows, prayers of intercession and blessing for the newlyweds, and a closing ceremony of the Kiss of Peace and dismissal.

One report that had been expected at this meeting, but was put off until spring was an assessment by a committee of bishops of the morality of current nuclear deterrence policies.

The committee, headed by Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, who chaired the committee which drafted the bishops' 1983 pastoral letter on war and peace, was formed two years ago after some bishops argued that the pastoral's strictly conditioned moral acceptance of deterrence had been violated by lack of progress in arms control and increased defense spending by the Reagan administration.

Cardinal Bernardin noted in a report

mailed to bishops before the meeting that there have been rapid changes in recent months in U.S.-Soviet negotiations on nuclear weapons and said the situation "should be made more clear in the next six months."

The action items on which the bishops were to vote included:

- The Central America statement, which updates a statement approved by the bishops in 1981. The new statement calls U.S. policy on Nicaragua "morally flawed" and says the lives of Central Americans should not be used "as pawns in a superpower struggle."

- A national pastoral plan for ministry to U.S. Hispanics based on the U.S. bishops' 1983 pastoral letter on Hispanics and the conclusions of the Third National Hispanic Pastoral Encuentro in 1985. The plan, among other things, calls for creation of small ecclesial communities within parishes to give Hispanics a greater sense of belonging and to respond to recruitment of Catholic Hispanics by other denominations.

- A statement critical of school-based health clinics which give contraceptives and abortion services to teen-agers. Providing such services is not only "morally objectionable" but may also be impractical, the proposed statement says.

- A proposal to begin a national collection aimed at easing the retirement crisis facing the nation's religious communities, particularly nuns. If approved, the monies collected would be distributed through a formula developed by the Tri-Conference Retirement Project. The project, organized by the bishops' conference and the conferences of men and women Religious, was begun last year to respond to a retirement debt estimated at \$2.5 billion.

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