

# Women's pastoral tops agenda for bishops

By Jerry Filteau  
Catholic News Service

NOTRE DAME, Ind. — Vigorous public debate about a still-controversial pastoral letter on women was the highlight of the June 18-20 spring meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference.

In a daylong session closed to the press, the bishops also discussed ways of dealing with the issue of priests who sexually abuse children.

Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, NCCB-USCC president, said the discussion was the fifth the bishops have had in recent years on pastoral, legal and other aspects of dealing with sexual abuse by priests.

Meeting on the 150-year-old campus of the University of Notre Dame, the bishops also discussed at some length the need for a new Catholic engagement in evangelization and the problems the church faces in trying to deal with aggressive proselytism by other groups directed especially at Catholic immigrants.

About 240 bishops attended the meeting, although some arrived late, others left early and those who were retired were not eligible to vote on conference business.

Participants voted — inconclusively — on a new Lectionary for Mass, approved new norms for national shrines and decided to change the way they assess dioceses to fund their national offices. The Lectionary vote is to be continued by mail balloting of bishops who were absent.

The bishops approved funding of \$4.5 million — including \$1 million to be collected from dioceses — for the August 1993 World Youth Day in Denver, an event featuring a visit by Pope John Paul II.

They also passed a resolution endorsing the day and urging young people throughout the country to begin preparing for it.

They heard an update report on the Vatican's soon-to-be published Catechism of the Catholic Church; a report from Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of



AP/Wide World Photos  
Denver Archbishop J. Francis Stafford (right) and Denver Mayor Wellington Webb appeared at an April 12 news conference announcing Pope John Paul II's visit to the city for 1993 World Youth Day. During the spring meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference, the bishops approved funding of \$4.5 million for next summer's event.

Los Angeles on the implications of the Los Angeles riots; and a report recommending various methods dioceses might use to consolidate some of their national collections.

Also in a private session, the bishops learned from Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington that the Vatican just a few days earlier had formally established a second canonical conference of U.S. women religious superiors alongside the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, whose status re-

mains the same.

The formation of the new group, called the Council of Major Religious Superiors of Women in the United States, was announced publicly June 22, three days after Cardinal Hickey reported it to the bishops.

It was the women's pastoral, however, that provoked the most interest both among the bishops and across the country.

On June 18, the bishops debated the pros and cons of the draft pastoral during sessions in the university's massive Joyce Athletic and Convocation Center. Across campus in the Hesburgh Library, meanwhile, a coalition of lay groups seeking change in the church held a daylong series of press conferences and other events.

The groups were there to argue for such causes as ordination of women, changes in church teaching on abortion and sexual matters, and acceptance of married men into the priesthood.

The groups seeking change — led by the Maryland-based group Catholics Speak Out — released a national Gallup Poll of Catholics, indicating that Catholic support for female and married priests has grown significantly in recent years.

During the bishops' session, however, most of those who addressed the question of ordaining women urged a stronger explanation and defense of the church's policy against women priests.

Only one, retired Bishop Charles A. Buswell of Pueblo, Colo., spoke out directly against the church's stand. He said that by excluding half of God's people from ordination because they are women, the church is guilty of the sin of sexism.

Bishop Raymond A. Lucker of New Ulm, Minn., urged the bishops to drop the idea of issuing a pastoral letter on women's concerns. Instead, he said, they should issue a more modest statement citing areas on which they could agree and admitting to their divisions on such issues as women's ordination.

At least two bishops questioned the proposed pastoral's call for more study

on the question of ordaining women to the diaconate, although that call only echoed a 1976 Vatican statement on the subject.

Several bishops called for the pastoral to subject feminism to the same kind of moral analysis as sexism, arguing that some forms of "radical feminism" are based on ideologies contrary to Christian belief.

In a straw poll, a solid majority of the bishops supported continuing work on the pastoral, but they decided not to delve just yet into the question of whether it should remain a pastoral letter or be downgraded to a document of lesser authority.

Several bishops said they would have a hard time deciding that before seeing how the document is revised when it comes to them this fall.

In other matters, a rumored boycott of the meeting by bishops angry at Notre Dame did not materialize.

The predicted boycott stemmed from the university's decision to award its prestigious Laetare Medal this spring to New York's Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan. Some bishops reportedly were angry that Notre Dame chose to honor Moynihan, a Catholic who has supported a legal right to abortion.

The number of bishops attending was actually higher than at the previous spring meeting in St. Paul, Minn., however.

The only clear act of boycott was by Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York, who conducted meetings of his Committee for Pro-Life Activities off-campus June 17 at a nearby Holiday Inn.

When the general meeting opened on campus the next day, Cardinal O'Connor was not in attendance. He did not appear at any of the public business sessions June 18 and 19.

Following a long pattern of devoting most of their spring meeting to reflection and discussion instead of decisions, the 240 bishops spent more than three-fourths of the three business days talking or listening to presentations on issues they are facing.

At the end of business June 20, they gathered at Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart, right next to the campus main building that features the university's famed Golden Dome, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the University of Notre Dame.

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