

Bishops move ahead on pastoral



AP/Wide World Photos
Evangelist Tony Alamo meets with reporters outside the U.S. District Courthouse in Fayetteville, Ark., June 15 after agreeing to pay \$5 million as part of a consent judgment. The settlement ends a 15-year lawsuit brought against Alamo and his foundation by the Department of Labor. Alamo, whose foundation publishes anti-Catholic literature, alleges that the Vatican plans to rule the world.

By Jerry Filteau
 Catholic News Service

NOTRE DAME, Ind. — In a June 18 straw poll, the U.S. Catholic bishops voted to move ahead toward a possible vote this fall on their proposed pastoral letter on women's concerns.

But the meeting clearly showed that the bishops have a long way to go before they will agree on what to say or how to say it.

After more than two hours of discussion and debate it remained unresolved whether the final document would be a pastoral letter.

Among other possibilities left open were downgrading the statement to the status of a public statement without the teaching authority generally associated with pastoral letters, or issuing it as a document of the committee that wrote it.

Women's ordination again arose as a major stumbling block — one that has plagued the pastoral since the project was started nearly a decade ago.

"The truly critical or neuralgic issue is that of ordination (of women)," said Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago.

"I think we really have to address that," he said, and "put more emphasis on why the church holds what it does."

The Vatican has said the church does not consider itself able to ordain women for a number of reasons, among them Christ's example in choosing only men as apostles; the unbroken tradition of the church that

should be considered "normative;" and the fact that in celebrating the Eucharist, a priest acts in the person of Christ, who was a man.

Most bishops who spoke about the ordination issue addressed it from the perspective of wanting the proposed pastoral — now in its third major draft — to explain the church teaching more fully and convincingly.

Bishop Francis E. George of Yakima, Wash., said he was puzzled that "we don't speak plainly about the nature of ordination." He suggested that the failure to spell out why the church ordains only men makes it seem that they are unsure of the teaching.

But at least two bishops expressed opposition to or serious reservations about the teaching itself.

Retired Bishop Charles A. Buswell of Pueblo, Colo., declared: "The church is guilty of sexism when it denies ordination to half its people because they are women."

He said that although the proposed letter is described as a pastoral response to the concerns of women in the church and society, "it seems to be a response more to our own concerns and the concerns of the Vatican."

Bishop Raymond A. Lucker of New Ulm, Minn., one of several bishops who unsuccessfully urged dropping the pastoral letter, said that "right from the start we had very serious difficulties" with writing a pastoral.

Although the bishops had no problem making suggestions to society about its treatment of women, "we

had difficulty applying Jesus' teachings to the daily life of the church itself," he said.

Bishop Luker urged dropping the pastoral in favor of "a brief positive statement" on things the bishops could clearly agree on, such as their consensus that sexism is sinful.

"We also need to name what divides us," he added, "and especially we need an open and honest study on the question of the ordination of women."

The open discussion of the pastoral letter took up most of the first afternoon of the bishops' June 18-20 spring business meeting, the first meeting of the bishops on the campus of the University of Notre Dame.

Earlier in the day that discussion narrowly missed being closed to the press, as Archbishop William J. Levada of Portland, Ore., asked the bishops to change the agenda and talk about the letter in their executive session instead.

The pastoral's drafting committee, headed by Bishop Joseph L. Imesch of Joliet, Ill., insisted on wide consultation with Catholic women as a basis for drafting the pastoral, and in many U.S. dioceses thousands of women met to discuss their views of the church and women. Rochester's Bishop Matthew H. Clark is a member of that committee.

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