Black delegates face busy agenda

By Julie Asher
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — When U.S. African-American Catholics gather in New Orleans July 9-12, they'll have work to do. They face a packed agenda focusing on the state of the African-American family.

But there is also a symbolic aspect to the gathering.

"The symbolic importance of our coming together cannot be overstated," said Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, about the National Black Catholic Congress.

"First of all it's important that we come together as a group of African-American Catholics to affirm our faith, to affirm our presence" in the church, he said.

"One of the difficulties we continue to face and one that is important we address is that many African-American people are not cognizant of the fact there are African-American Catholics; they see the church as largely white."

The congress also offers a message to the larger church — "that the church is a mosaic," he added in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

There are 2,300 people registered for the congress; 1,500 are delegates eligible to vote, including 10 from the Diocese of Rochester. About 100 U.S. bishops are expected to attend.

The history of congresses for black Catholics began in the 19th century, with five congresses held between 1889 and 1894. They focused on segregation within the church. The sixth congress — the first held in this century — was in May, 1987 at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Out of that gathering, which drew 1,500, came a national pastoral plan emphasizing evangelization.

Recommendations for this seventh congress will examine the effects of racism on the African-American family, the internal structure of African-American family life, and the African-American male.

Bishop Ricard said that beyond symbolism, dealing with such critical social issues is the other important reason for the congress.

Public-policy statements that delegates will be asked to approve cover national family policy, Medicaid, universal health care, welfare reform, job training and opportunity, multicultural curricula, and minority scholarship.

Pastoral statements also up for a vote concern marriage, laity, children and youth, religious education, Catholic schools, evangelization, pastoral ministry to families and African-American ministries.

Delegates followed a lengthy preparation process. After being elected in their respective dioceses during days of reflection in the fall, they began weekly training sessions in February and ended in June. Much of their work was developing the agenda items through discussions with local black Catholics, diocesan family life directors and state Catholic conference officials.

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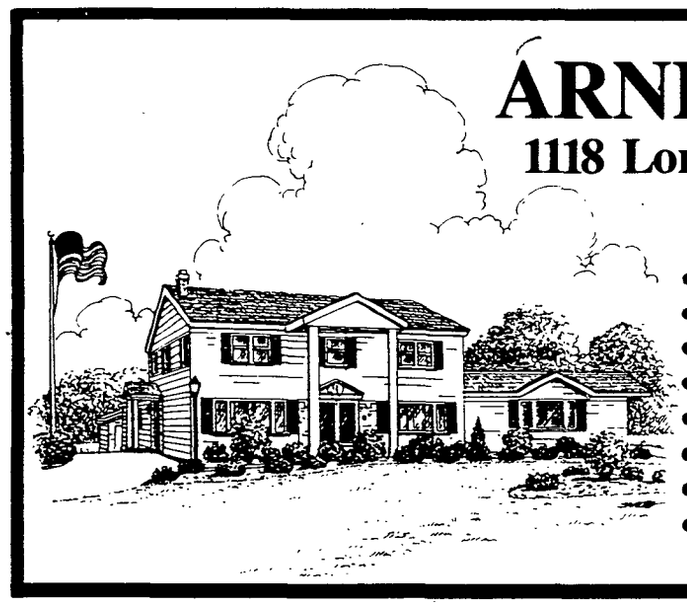

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