

Bishops: Vote doesn't mean lack of interest

By Laurie Hansen
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Two prominent U.S. bishops said the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' rejection of a controversial pastoral letter on women's concerns does not indicate a lack of interest in those concerns.

On the contrary, they said, the vote meant the body of bishops was not satisfied with the response given to women's concerns in the document.

The proposed pastoral, nine years and four drafts in the making, treated numerous topics, from the need for affordable day care to no-fault divorce, and included a vigorous defense of church teaching prohibiting women's ordination.

Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, immediate past president of the NCCB, said the pastoral's rejection shouldn't be interpreted as the bishops' saying "women are on the back shelf for another 10 years."

Instead, it indicated that for myriad reasons "not enough of (the bishops) wanted this pastoral as our voice," he told Catholic News Service Nov. 19.

Bishop Joseph L. Imesch of Joliet, Ill., chairman of the bishops' committee that wrote the pastoral, agreed.

"I would hope women would see (the pastoral's rejection) in a very positive way," said Bishop Imesch in an interview at the end of the bishops' Nov. 16-19 annual fall meeting in Washington.

The vote was 137-110 in favor of the pastoral, but the bishops could not come up with the two-thirds majority of the 285 active bishops — 190 votes — required to approve the document.

It was the first time a U.S. bishops' pastoral letter has ever been opposed by more than 30 votes.

The bishops voted to turn the document over to committees that can pursue some of the letter's objectives at a less authoritative level.

Debate over the document resulted in discussion of the topic of women's ordination to the priesthood for two days in a row on the floor of the bishops' meeting. The theme had plagued the pastoral's writing committee through its nine years of work.

"This was the first time that has happened," said Bishop Imesch. Without



AP/Wide World Photos
DOCUMENT DEFEATED — Bishop Joseph Imesch (left) of Joliet, Ill., and Archbishop Edward A. McCarthy of Miami meet reporters in Washington Nov. 18 during a meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. During the meeting, the U.S. bishops voted down their pastoral letter on women in the church. Bishop Imesch was chairman of the committee that has worked on writing the pastoral for the past nine years.

the bishops' work on the pastoral, "those words would not have been mentioned."

The bishops' decision to reject the pastoral letter was applauded by Priests for Equality, an international group of priests, deacons, religious and bishops based in the Washington suburb of Hyattsville, Md. The group favors women's ordination.

The vote "will keep alive the vital dialogue needed to confront sexism in the church and to establish full participation for women in the church's life and mission, including ordination," said a Nov. 18 statement by the group.

Auxiliary Bishop P. Francis Murphy of Baltimore, who has said publicly that women should be ordained priests, also was pleased with the vote.

In a statement he said the bishops' vote was "an honest acknowledgement of the need for more dialogue and the guidance of the spirit in addressing the serious disagreements which remain among us."

Bishop Imesch, however, told CNS that there were only "a few bishops, very few, who favor ordination of women."

On the other hand, he said, most bishops "would like to see the matter clarified and discussed more openly."

Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, addressing students at Washington's Trinity College the same day the bishops defeated the pastoral, said the debate over women's role in

the church and society "is not over; it's just starting."

He said he interpreted the vote as a sign that "we haven't come to any consensus yet," despite the nine years of debate on four drafts of the proposed pastoral.

Archbishop Pilarczyk suggested that the pastoral's wide focus may have doomed it from the outset.

"I think as the process went on the impression was inevitably given that this (pastoral) is where the bishops are going to talk about" all issues of concern to women, he said, and it fell short.

While the two-thirds majority needed to approve a bishops' pastoral letter "is a big majority," said Archbishop Pilarczyk, "that's the way it should be. If the bishops' conference is going to teach, it's got to teach with a lot of support."

He said bishops voted against the document for a number of reasons other than its treatment of women's ordination.

Some bishops, he said, felt the pastoral's spectrum was too expansive, while others were concerned their pet portion of the document "wasn't focused enough," or remained unconvinced a pastoral letter was the "right vehicle" for the message.

A statement released Nov. 19 by Bishop Phillip F. Straling of San Bernardino, Calif., said he voted against the pastoral because topics including sexism in society and domestic violence were not sufficiently addressed in it. In addition, it said, he felt the pastoral was not a good teaching document in its current form.

Bishop Imesch said he personally favored the first of the four drafts his committee released.

The drafts evolved "from most interesting to least interesting," he said. "There was a vitality and energy to the first draft. Gradually we lost that."

In his view, the "church teaching aspects" of the pastoral didn't change from draft to draft, "but the way we expressed them did."

The drafts changed dramatically through nine years of committee work based on recommendations from bishops, Vatican officials and consultation with Catholic women.

Quotations from Catholic women voicing concerns and sometimes struggling with church teaching were sprinkled liberally through the first draft. It called for a study of the possibility of ordaining women as deacons but also stated that the church "does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."

Other meeting highlights

WASHINGTON (CNS) — During their Nov. 16-19 meeting in Washington, the bishops:

- Defeated their controversial pastoral letter on women's concerns, but ordered it published as a committee report and asked the Executive Committee to take further action on its recommendations.

- Passed a resolution on clergy sex abuse reiterating the need to take quick action on accusations of abuse and to be a "healing" presence in the wake of such allegations.

- Endorsed a pastoral letter on stewardship which described following Jesus as "the work of a lifetime."

- Overwhelmingly passed a national plan for evangelization in the United States, but turned down a move to fund a conference staff position to promote evangelization.

- Authorized a new Mass for human life, accepted a revised translation of the Lectionary, and established a policy for adding saints to the new calendar of celebrations.

- Elected Archbishop William H.

- Keeler of Baltimore as president and Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland as vice president for the next three years. Archbishop Daniel W. Kucera of Dubuque, Iowa, was elected to fill the last year of Bishop Pilla's unexpired term as treasurer.

- Chose several new committee chairmen and members, as well as four delegates and two alternates to the 1994 world Synod of Bishops.

- Extended for one more year the special national collection to help churches in Eastern Europe.

- Voted on future priorities and plans and approved a 1993 budget of nearly \$41.4 million for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and its public policy arm, the U.S. Catholic Conference.

- Overwhelmingly approved a new national plan for seminary formation.

- Heard reports on plans for World Youth Day next year, the universal catechism, Catholic Relief Service activities worldwide and other topics of mutual interest.

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