

WORLD & NATION

Bishops consider statements on justice, life

WASHINGTON (CNS) — After the outgoing president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops renewed his call for reconciliation among various church factions Nov. 16, the U.S. bishops set to work on a wide-ranging agenda that includes such issues as justice, human dignity and vocations.

Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland, who was to end a three-year term as president of the NCCB and U.S. Catholic Conference at the close of the Nov. 16-19 meeting, praised lay Catholics in his opening talk but said there are some in the church who "are unwilling to accept a role for authority in the church."

He said, however, that it would be a mistake "to forget to nourish the many in our attempts to appease the unappeasable few."

Bishop Pilla is to be succeeded by Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, who was elected Nov. 17 to a three-year term as president. He had been vice president.

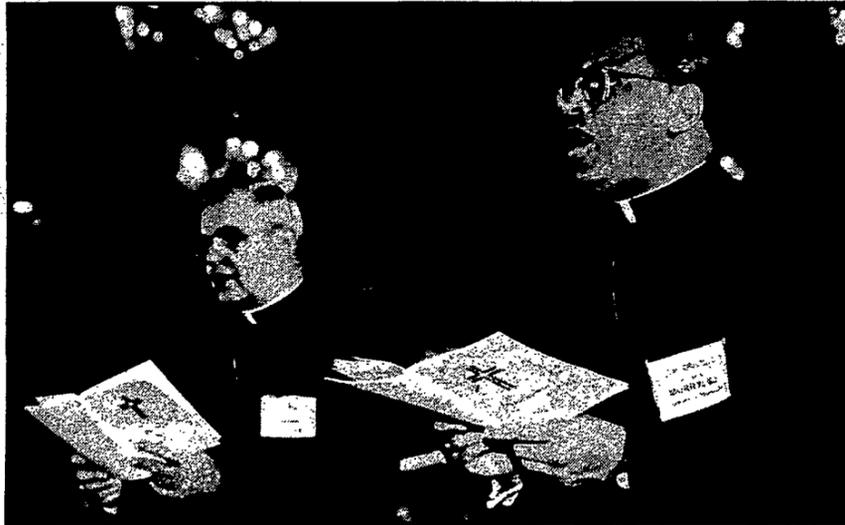
Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., was chosen to serve as NCCB-USCC vice president for the next three years.

On Nov. 16 the bishops approved to a rule under which each province of bishops can decide to transfer observance of Ascension from Thursday to the seventh Sunday of Easter.

They also approved a budget of \$46.8 million for 1999 and OK'd the coming year's priorities and plans.

On Nov. 17, the bishops unanimously approved the 3,000-word statement, titled "Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice," in a unanimous voice vote without debate Nov. 17. The statement challenges U.S. Catholics to meet "the demands of discipleship in the pursuit of justice and peace in everyday activity."

"Catholics are called by God to protect human life, to promote human dignity, to



Bob Roller/CNS
Coadjutor Bishop George Murry of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, joins his fellow bishops in prayer at the opening of their annual fall meeting in Washington Nov. 16.

defend the poor and to seek the common good," it says. "This social mission of the church belongs to all of us. It is an essential part of what it is to be a believer."

The bishops were also scheduled to consider two proposed statements: "Welcome and Justice for People With Disabilities" and "Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics."

The "welcome and justice" statement, from the Committee on Pastoral Practices, draws from earlier statements to summarize the rights of people with disabilities and the church's commitment to them.

The second statement, proposed by the Committee for Pro-Life Activities, describes American society as a culture that is morally adrift and insensitive to the sacredness of human life.

It calls on "U.S. Catholics, especially

those in positions of leadership — whether cultural, economic or political — to recover their identity as followers of Christ and to be leaders in the renewal of American respect for the sanctity of life."

It was revised to include the observation that capital punishment also warrants a "respect for life" perspective.

"It is increasingly clear in modern society that capital punishment is unnecessary to protect people's safety and the public order, so that cases where it may be justified are 'very rare, if not practically non-existent,'" the draft document said, quoting Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life").

The statement also was amended to drop part of a passage and rephrase another in sections about addressing Catholic public officials who take a stance at odds with

church teaching. A section in which bishops are urged to persuade and admonish Catholic public officials was stripped of the phrase "do whatever else may be pastorally required." A preface to the amended text notes that some bishops raised concerns that the phrase might be read "as an invitation to considering canonical sanctions."

While in a few cases individual bishops have imposed canonical sanctions on Catholic politicians whose public actions contradict church teaching on life issues, the conference as a whole has steered clear of suggesting such politicians be excommunicated or otherwise subject to church punishment for their political actions.

The bishops were scheduled to discuss — but only in preparation for a vote at a later meeting — drafts of three other documents:

- "Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us," a proposed pastoral plan on adult faith formation being developed by the Committee on Education.

- A new statement and U.S. norms implementing *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the Heart of the Church"), the 1990 papal document establishing norms for Catholic universities worldwide. The Vatican rejected an earlier version of local implementation adopted by the bishops because it did not address canon law requirements for teachers of sacred sciences.

- U.S. norms implementing a 1996 Vatican instruction calling on bishops to set stricter standards and procedures for screening applicants for priesthood or religious life who have already left or been dismissed from another seminary or religious order.

Other actions to come up for debate and vote during the meeting include revised guidelines for diocesan vocation offices, updating those approved in 1983, and two Spanish-language liturgical texts for funeral rites.

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