

WORLD & NATION

Bishops approve norms on Catholic universities

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The U.S. Catholic bishops ended their last general meeting of the millennium Nov. 18 by approving a flurry of documents on topics as narrow as bishops' pension benefits and as broad as the new millennium itself.

Also endorsed on the final day of the Nov. 15-18 meeting were a 10,000-word pastoral message on charity and a statement extolling the "blessings of age" and asking parishes to make ministry to the elderly a priority.

The bishops also discussed but did not vote on a proposed new document on church art and architecture.

But the most contentious issue facing the bishops at their 1999 meeting was resolved Nov. 17 with approval of U.S. norms implementing Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic exhortation on Catholic

higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

The vote was 223-31 to adopt one of the most widely debated and most often rewritten documents the bishops have handled since their pastoral letters on the economy and on war and peace in the 1980s.

Though the college norms remain controversial in the academic community, supporters of the norms argued that they are needed and have been sufficiently refined to deal with the most serious objections raised against earlier versions.

Another major discussion focused on plans to merge the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference into a single entity called the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Among the conference officers elected were Buffalo's Bishop Henry J. Mansell as treasurer, and Msgr. William P. Fay, as general secretary-elect.

In other matters, the bishops approved a \$52.7 million budget for 2000 and a diocesan assessment increase of 1.6 percent in 2001.

On the last day of their fall general meeting, the bishops also approved a document on the portability of retired bishops' pensions, as well as statements on the elderly and on charity.

The new pastoral message titled "Blessings of Age" is "going to be very helpful to a lot of folks," said Bishop Joseph P. Delaney of Fort Worth, Texas.

"We really hope that more and more parishes will see ministry to the elderly as a very important part of parish life," he said, and "will use the wonderful pool of talent and experience and time that older folks have to provide ministry ... to themselves and to others."

Without debate, the bishops also ap-

proved "In All Things Charity: A Pastoral Challenge for the New Millennium," a document that asks Catholics to pledge to pray for justice and peace; to learn more about church social teachings; to reach across race, religion and other types of boundaries; and to live more generous lives of justice, service to the poor and advocacy for human life and dignity.

They overwhelmingly approved a pastoral plan on adult faith formation that stresses the importance of lifelong education to help adult Catholics make their faith stronger. But they deferred until June a decision on whether to initiate a project leading to a new national adult catechism.

Several of the bishops' actions — including approval of the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* norms — must be ratified by the Vatican before they take effect.

New state clinic access law concerns church officials

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

Church officials are calling new state legislation to protect access to abortion clinics a "slap in the face" to pro-lifers.

Gov. George Pataki signed into law the "Clinic Access and Anti-stalking Act of 1999" on Nov. 22. The pen he used reportedly was going to the widow of Dr. Barnett Slepian, the abortion provider who was assassinated in his Buffalo-area home in 1998.

"Symbolically, it's a huge cave-in by a traditionally pro-life Senate to accept this bill," said Kathleen Gallagher, spokeswoman for the New York State Catholic Conference. She added, "It is a slap in the face to pro-life people."

Suzanne Schnittman, life issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester, noted the diocese has been protesting the legislation, which was passed several times by the House since 1993 and finally by the Senate in July.

"We're disappointed," she said. "We're totally against it, because it is viewpoint-based discrimination against pro-life activists. We object to the law because it punishes some demonstrators while not punishing others."

"It looks protective of clinics ... but it does not fundamentally change the legal position of demonstrators," she added.

The law also establishes stalking as a specific crime and strengthens penalties against stalkers. New York had increased penalties for such behavior under men-

acing, harassment and assault statutes beginning in 1992.

The law imposes increased penalties on a person who blocks or attempts to block access to a health-care facility, according to Assemblywoman Susan John, D-Monroe County, sponsor of the legislation. It also imposes increased penalties on a person who damages or attempts to damage the property, or who injures or attempts to injure a person in order to discourage the person from seeking or providing reproductive health services.

Gallagher noted that the law, which goes into effect Dec. 1, will give a higher criminal penalty to people obstructing access to an abortion clinic based on the "why" of their actions, than to others.

This year the bill passed 54-5 in the Senate, with no legislators within the Rochester diocese's 12 counties voting against it, and 116-28 in the House, with Assemblyman Charles Nesbitt the only legislator within the diocesan area voting against it, according to the New York State Catholic Conference. Nesbitt represents parts of Genesee, Orleans and Monroe counties.

"The real tragedy is that this is not about setting good policy for the citizens of New York state. This is about politics," Gallagher said. "The legislature felt, the governor felt they had to sign this law to win elections."

"We hope and pray that law enforcement officials will enforce this new law justly," Gallagher added.

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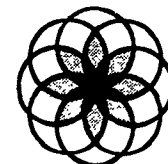
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