

Bishops address migrant concerns

U.S., Mexican bishops to become partners in supporting migrants

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — With overwhelming approval that followed a short discussion during their fall general meeting, the U.S. Catholic bishops gave their support Nov. 13 to the first joint pastoral statement of the U.S. and Mexican bishops' conferences: a document defining a partnership in addressing pastoral and social concerns of migrants.

"Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope" also was approved by the Mexican bishops Nov. 14 during their annual conference. After minor differences in the approved versions are worked out by a joint committee, the document is to be issued jointly no later than January 2003. The U.S. bishops vote on the statement was 243-1.

"We speak as two episcopal conferences but as one church," the statement says, "united in the view that migration between our two nations is necessary and beneficial. At the same time, some aspects of the migrant experience are far from the vision of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed."

It notes that many people who seek to migrate do so because they are suffering. "Human rights are abused; families are kept apart; and

racist and xenophobic attitudes remain."

The document calls for steps such as the creation of parish networks of support for migrant families; for dioceses to sponsor social and legal services for immigrants and for the two bishops' organizations to work on ways of training priests and laity for service to migrants.

It also takes both governments to task for laws and policies that fail to address the root causes of migration and infringe upon the human rights of people who move between countries.

Bishop Raymundo J. Pena of Brownsville, Texas, thanked the bishops for responding to the request for such a document made two years ago by the bishops of dioceses along both sides of the Texas-Mexico border.

That request is one of just several joint efforts by bishops in adjacent border dioceses in recent years. Bishops from Arizona and the Mexican state of Sonora will meet in Nogales, Mexico, Nov. 21-23 for a "Dioceses Without Borders" conference on ways the church on both sides of the border can provide ministry and services collaboratively. Dioceses in Southern California, New Mexico and Texas also regularly share projects such as joint "Las Posadas" Advent programs at the border fence with their Mexican neighbors.

Auxiliary Bishop Thomas G.



Nancy Wiehac/CNS

U.S. Bishop Thomas G. Wenski and Mexican Bishop Carlos Talavera Ramirez address the media Nov. 11 in Washington on a joint pastoral on migration being drawn up by the U.S. and Mexican bishops' conferences. When approved, "Strangers No Longer" will be the first joint statement issued by the U.S. and Mexican bishops' conferences.

Wenski of Miami, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration, said the statement is particularly timely considering that the two countries are scheduled to begin bilateral talks early next year on a variety of topics, including those related to migration.

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., said he supports the statement but objected to one three-letter word — joy — which was used in a description of the blending of European and indigenous Mexican cultures.

"For the people of Mexico it was a painful clash," he said.

A plaque in a plaza in Mexico City dedicated to the merging of the cultures better describes the events, he said.

It refers to the battle between the Aztec ruler Cuahtemoc and Spaniard Hernando Cortez in 1519 as "neither victory nor defeat" for either culture, Bishop Ramirez explained.

When the statement was intro-

duced before the U.S. bishops two days earlier, Bishop Carlos Talavera Ramirez of Coatzacoalcos, Mexico, called the document "a convergence of life embracing both our cultural, social, political and religious values and perspectives, in relation to the migrants' pastoral care."

The statement was the product of five consultations between the U.S. bishops' migration committee and the Mexican Episcopal Commission for Migrants and five meetings between their staffs. The committees also interviewed 200 migrants from various countries on the causes and effects of migration.

The pastoral describes the different immigration-related challenges of the two countries and how they are connected.

It also explains the church's teaching related to migration, beginning with the story from Genesis of how Abraham and his wife, Sarah, extended hospitality to strangers who "were actually a manifestation of the Lord."

It notes that the church has a long tradition of defending the right to migrate and that it also teaches that "the root causes of migration — poverty, forms of injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts — must be addressed so that migrants can remain in their homeland and support their families."

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