

Bishops OK marriage plan

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — A sense of urgency about emphasizing the church's teaching on marriage and family seemed to outweigh U.S. bishops' concerns for their new priority-setting procedures Nov. 17, as they voted 195-20 to approve a new pastoral initiative on marriage.

The marriage initiative will begin with a survey of bishops about the issues they want addressed, followed by a symposium of theologians and social scientists, focus groups of lay people and sessions with pastoral leaders and bishops' conference committees. A potential national research project through the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University also would be incorporated into the planning.

After that process, expected to take place in 2005-06, a pastoral letter will be written and approved, probably in 2007. Steps to implement the pastoral letter are expected to begin in 2007.

"We can help to create a positive climate that places healthy marriages at the heart of strong families, a strong nation and a strong and holy church," said Bishop J. Kevin

Boland of Savannah, Ga., chairman of the Committee on Marriage and Family Life. "This is a pastoral moment we should seize upon."

The bishops voted down an attempt to remand the proposed marriage initiative to go through a newly adopted process of committee review of all priorities and plans.

A day earlier a proposal for a pastoral initiative to encourage Catholics to study the Bible was remanded for review. Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk had moved to put both initiatives back through the planning process adopted earlier in the bishops' annual meeting.

But by the next morning, there was little support among the bishops for taking the same step with the marriage initiative.

Bishop Boland prefaced his presentation by explaining that, while the proposal for a task force was crafted before the new priority and planning procedures were adopted, it actually had been through most of the steps the new processes establish.

He said the recent debate about same-sex marriage has shown that while most Americans agree that

marriage should be defined as a life-long union of a man and a woman many struggle to connect that ideal with what they encounter in daily life.

People still turn to churches and faith communities to help them prepare for, to be sustained in and to heal marital relationships, he said.

Bishop Boland said the development of a pastoral letter could address such issues as why the U.S. marriage rate has declined by more than 40 percent in the last 30 years; the consequences of delayed marriage and the increase in the number of people who never marry; the effects of divorce; the effect of cohabiting relationships on marriage; and the beliefs and behaviors that contribute to strong, happy marriages.

In urging the bishops not to set aside the marriage pastoral proposal, Coadjutor Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., said if the bishops get carried away with the idea of only taking up subjects that have been through the vetting process they risk finding themselves "in the position where the only thing we are speaking on is sexual abuse."

"Crash diets are rarely success-



Paul Haring/CNS

A newly married couple stroll near the Colosseum in Rome in this December 1999 file photo. On Nov. 17, the U.S. bishops approved a new pastoral initiative on marriage.

ful," he said.

Bishop Victor B. Galeone of St. Augustine, Fla., said that while he supported pressing forward with the pastoral-letter plans in light of recent events he fears that a project which takes many years is "too little, too late."



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