

Archbishop Lori: Aspects of episcopal accountability already in place in Baltimore

As the U.S. bishops gathered in Baltimore June 11 for their spring meeting, holding bishops accountable for their own conduct and their actions or inaction in handling clergy sexual abuse of minors was the focus of the morning presentations.

The bishops will debate and vote June 13 on three proposals regarding implementation of new law for the church declared by Pope Francis May 9, restrictions on retired bishops who were removed from office for misconduct or malfeasance, and affirming episcopal commitments.

But the bishops also heard early presentations on updating teaching on the death penalty in the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults, and were briefed on efforts to reach out to people who are unaffiliated with the Catholic Church or any church.

Archbishop William E. Lori said many of the elements on episcopal accountability that have been proposed are already in place in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

“These measures are all about holding ourselves accountable as bishops, making sure that we are subject to exactly the same standards and procedures as everybody else,” he said.

He noted that after the November bishops’ meeting when the conference was asked by the Vatican to hold off on voting on such measures until after a global bishops’ summit in February, he went home and asked what he and his auxiliary bishops in Baltimore could do within the current standards.

“We were able to put in a third-party reporting system that applies to myself and my auxiliary bishops, a reporting system that goes to two of the lay members of our review board who are retired judges, to the nuncio (the pope’s representative in the U.S.) and to law enforcement,” he said.

The bishops also signed the same code of conduct that other clergy and employees in the archdiocese sign, and instituted “other measures to make sure that we would get ahead of the curve. What we see now is these sorts of things being enacted, God willing, on a national level,” the archbishop said.

The involvement of the laity in these processes is vital, he said. That includes the members of the archdiocese’s Independent Review Board as well as lay staff with the necessary expertise.

Archbishop Lori said the robust question session about the accountability proposals seemed to indicate that bishops were given “an opportunity to explore areas that might need further clarification. ... It’s also enlightening for all of us who are about to vote on these matters.”

Bishop Robert P. Deeley, chairman of the Committee on Canonical Affairs and Governance and leader of the Diocese of Portland, Maine, said the number of questions could signal a potentially large number of amendments from the bishops before the final document is presented. However, he noted that the committee had already spent five hours the day before considering amendments submitted in advance.

“Some of what was discussed today were amendments we already looked at,” he said.

Commenting on the presentation from Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron, chairman of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, regarding reaching out to those who have left the church, Archbishop Lori said the bishop’s talk “did my old heart a lot of good because he identified exactly what we are seeking to do in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in efforts to make missionary disciples.”

“One of the things you have to do is to clear away people’s misconceptions, deal with their problems and their worries and their questions. And in that way, you prepare the ground for the seed of faith,” the archbishop said.

He said the archdiocese’s new #IamCatholic movement, which hopes to share testimonies from people about why they are Catholic, addresses some of that need.

He said it is especially helpful when young Catholics share their faith and inspire others.

"I see that right under my nose at the (Baltimore) Basilica, where the young Catholics in the basilica congregation are being encouraged to go out and to evangelize the young people in the Mount Vernon neighborhood. And it's a wonderful thing to see that," Archbishop Lori said.

*For ongoing coverage of the bishops' meeting, click **here**.*