

Archbishop O'Brien to form priest advisory council

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien has begun the process of establishing his presbyteral council, a key consultative body of priests from throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore required by the Code of Canon Law.

The presbyteral council will be made up of about 30 priests - half of whom will be elected by their fellow priests with others to be appointed by Archbishop O'Brien. Several priests, such as the chancellor, will hold automatic membership because of their office in the church. The advisory group will hold its first meeting Jan. 17.

"The elections will be done by region," said Monsignor Robert Jaskot, chancellor. "The presbyteral council may include diocesan priests and also members of religious communities who work in the archdiocese."

Priests engaged in special ministry will also elect representatives to the council, Monsignor Jaskot said.

Members will serve three-year terms, with terms to be staggered so that a third of the members will change each year, the chancellor said.

When Cardinal William H. Keeler's retirement was accepted by Pope Benedict XVI, his presbyteral council was disbanded as required by church law. In advance of the formation of the new council, Archbishop O'Brien met with the former council on Nov. 28 for nearly four hours at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland. The priests discussed key issues facing the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

"The presbyteral council is my most important group of advisors," said Archbishop O'Brien in his opening report. "So close must be the unity between the bishop and priest that the council should always be among a diocesan bishop's highest priorities."

During the Nov. 28 meeting, the archbishop thanked priests for the "warm welcome" he received at his installation and at the more than 70 parishes he has already visited. Archbishop O'Brien also stressed the importance of increasing vocations,

protecting the sanctity of life and “saving the City of Baltimore,” according to a Nov. 30 archdiocesan statement.

“These goals are our obligation to address and while I don’t have a specific plan to tackle the challenges, I expect that the presbyteral council will play an integral part of planning ways to address these challenges,” he said.

The archbishop added that he expects the council will work with Catholic Charities, the Division of Catholic Schools and lay leaders from the parishes to “formulate strategies.”

In addition to the archbishop’s report, several other representatives of the archdiocese made presentations to the group on issues including the establishment of an archdiocesan-wide emergency notification system, the governance of parishes and the impact of a proposed change in the law concerning the filing of civil claims against the archdiocese and its parishes, according to the archdiocesan statement.

“The archdiocese will likely once again be facing a critical challenge in Annapolis this year when it is expected that a bill will be introduced that will single out private entities, such as the Catholic Church, for exposure to civil lawsuits for monetary damages in decades-old abuse cases,” said Sean Caine, archdiocesan director of communications.

“Catholics in the archdiocese need to be aware of the potential threat to the ministries and services provided by the archdiocese’s parishes, schools, and other institutions should such a bill be passed, and the valuable role they can play in defeating a measure which would do nothing to protect children or to promote healing of victims,” he said.

According to the archdiocesan statement, an open forum at the end of the Nov. 28 meeting included a discussion of a variety of issues including communicating the availability of parishes that have the Latin Mass and the plan for possible participation of the Archdiocese of Baltimore during the pope’s visit to Washington, D.C. Following the meeting, the archbishop concelebrated a Mass for deceased clergy.

“There was good give and take between the archbishop and the priests,” said Father

Sylvester Peterka, C.M., pastor of Immaculate Conception/St. Cecilia in Baltimore and a former member of Cardinal Keeler's presbyteral council.

"It was reaffirming to hear that he wants to listen to our voices," Father Peterka said.

Kathleen Swanson, archdiocesan planning/council services coordinator, said ballots for the new presbyteral council have already been distributed to priests. A second ballot will be held between the top two vote-getters of each region, she said, and the new members of the council will be notified Jan. 11. The presbyteral council meets with the archbishop five times a year.