

# Bishops' agenda more devoted to internal matters than to societal ills

WASHINGTON – The U.S. bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore will be shorter than usual and focus primarily on the inner workings of the church than on larger societal issues.

The Nov. 14-16 meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, originally scheduled to last until Nov. 17, will include a discussion on religious liberty that could touch on a wide range of topics. But the main business of the gathering will be on liturgical, financial and organizational matters.

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, elected to head the USCCB for a three-year term last November, will open the meeting with his first presidential address. If tradition holds, the talk will present a "state of the U.S. church" message and a look at the challenges Archbishop Dolan foresees for the coming year.

It could also be the first USCCB meeting for Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, recently appointed as the new apostolic nuncio to the United States, who has said he hoped to arrive in the U.S. in time for the assembly.

Looking back on one of their biggest challenges of the past 18 months, the bishops will vote on whether to make their former Task Force on Health Care into a permanent Subcommittee on Health Care Issues under the Committee on Doctrine.

The subcommittee would address such issues as "guidance in implementing the bishops' 'Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services,' non-Catholic hospitals in Catholic health care systems, for-profit Catholic health care, canonical status of Catholic health care facilities, conscience protection and health care reform," according to a USCCB news release.

Members of the subcommittee would represent the committees on doctrine, canon law and church governance, pro-life activities, and domestic justice and human development and could include other bishops or consultants, the release said.

Also up for a vote at the meeting is a resolution to support yearly voluntary financial reporting by each diocesan bishop in the U.S. to the archbishop who heads his ecclesiastical province.

The resolution, proposed by the Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, “acknowledges the legitimate rights of the diocesan bishop to administer the material resources of the diocese” yet “provides a vehicle for fraternal cooperation and support among all bishops of the province and assist the metropolitan archbishop in his own special solicitude” for the dioceses in his province, according to material distributed to the bishops with the resolution.

The resolution would be in effect from January 2012 through November 2016. The first such resolution was passed by the bishops in 2000 and renewed in 2004 and 2006.

Under the process outlined in the resolution, members of each diocesan finance council would certify yearly that they have met, reviewed and discussed the audited financial statements of the diocese and the management letter, if any, for the fiscal year and that they have been consulted in accord with the requirements of canon law.

Canon law requires a diocesan bishop to consult his finance council on such matters as selecting and removing the diocesan finance officer, determining appropriate investment strategies and selling diocesan properties whose appraised value is more than the minimum amount determined by the bishops’ conference.

Several liturgical matters are scheduled to come before the bishops for a vote. They will decide whether to include two new optional memorials, for Blessed Marianne Cope and Blessed John Paul II, in the proper of saints calendar for the United States and whether to approve a new translation of the Rite for Blessing the Oil of Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick, and for Consecrating the Chrism.

The Jan. 23 feast day for Mother Marianne, who was beatified in May 2005, is already observed as an optional memorial in the Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y., where she entered religious life, and the Diocese of Honolulu, where she served for many years caring for those afflicted with leprosy.

Pope John Paul's Oct. 22 feast day would also become an optional memorial on the U.S. liturgical calendar if approved at the meeting. The late pope was beatified May 1.

Each of the liturgical items requires a two-thirds vote of the Latin Church members of the USCCB, followed by confirmation by the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments. The congregation has already approved liturgical texts in English and Spanish for each of the optional memorials.

The U.S. bishops had hoped to include the rites for blessing oils and chrism in the new translation of the Roman Missal that debuts on the first Sunday in Advent. But the Vatican said the rites should be included in a revised edition of the Roman Pontifical, the collected liturgical ceremonies celebrated by bishops, or in a separate ritual text.

If they are approved, the bishops are hoping for quick confirmation by the Vatican so that the rites can be printed and distributed for use during Holy Week, the week of April 1 in 2012.

Also on the bishops' agenda are a variety of reports on issues of interest both within and outside the conference. They include:

- An update by Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington on the process of incorporating Anglican groups into the U.S. Catholic Church under Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 apostolic constitution "Anglicanorum coetibus."
- A report by Bishop Kevin J. Farrell of Dallas, chairman of the Committee on National Collections, on new guidelines for administering USCCB collections in dioceses.
- Information from Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, on the work of Project Rachel, a post-abortion healing initiative.
- A presentation evaluating the USCCB reorganization, as well as reports on the conference's priority plan and three priority initiatives for 2013-2015.

- A report by the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth and its Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage.

The bishops also will vote on the 2012 conference budget and elect a new secretary-elect, chairmen-elect of five committees, board members of Catholic Relief Services and a chairman for the Committee on International Justice and Peace.