

Bishops approve blessing service for children in the womb

BALTIMORE – To fill a gap in existing prayer books, the U.S. bishops Nov. 11 overwhelmingly approved a liturgical service in English and Spanish for blessing children in the womb.

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., praised the new blessing as “a tangible way to witness pastorally and sacramentally to the life of the unborn child” and said it could also serve as an opportunity for parishes to bring together expectant couples for mutual support.

Bishop Michael D. Pfeifer of San Angelo, Texas, said the document could present “a great catechetical moment for all of us.” He said he hoped it might lead the bishops to declare an annual day of prayer for the unborn in the future.

The document required the approval of two-thirds of the Latin-rite members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and must be sent to the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments for “recognitio,” or confirmation. The English-language version was approved 223-1 and the Spanish-language version 224-0.

Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the bishops’ Committee on Divine Worship, introduced the document Nov. 10, the first day of the USCCB fall general assembly in Baltimore.

He said the blessing, which had been approved both by his committee and by the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, “was prepared to support the parents awaiting the birth of their child, to encourage in the parish prayers for and recognition of the precious gift of the child in the womb, and to foster respect for human life within society.”

The blessing can be used in the context of a Mass or outside a Mass, and for an individual mother, a couple or a group of expectant parents.

Bishop Serratelli said the pro-life committee had received requests from “a number of dioceses” for such a document.

The blessing includes intercessions “for our government and civic leaders that they may perform their duties with justice and compassion while respecting the gift of human life” and “for a safe and healthy pregnancy for all expectant mothers and for a safe delivery for their children.”

It also expresses concern “for children who are unwanted, unloved, abandoned or abused, that the Lord will inspire his people to protect and care for them.”

If used as a blessing outside Mass, the service includes introductory prayers, Scripture readings, intercessions, the actual blessing of the mother and child, and a concluding rite.

“May almighty God, who has created new life, now bless the child in your womb,” the blessing says. “The Lord has brought you the joy of motherhood: May he bless you with a safe and healthy pregnancy. You thank the Lord today for the gift of your child: May he bring you and your child one day to share in the unending joys of heaven.”

There are also optional prayers for fathers, for families and for the parish community.

Once approved by the Vatican, the blessing will be included in future editions of the Book of Blessings when that liturgical text is revised.

But Bishop Earl A. Boyea of Lansing, Mich., asked that consideration be given to putting the blessing also in the book “Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers” so that it could be used in other than church services.

“It could be useful to those marching outside abortion clinics, to bless the mothers and children inside,” he said.