

Bishops vote to establish new Subcommittee on Health Care Issues

The U.S. bishops voted Nov. 14 to establish a permanent Subcommittee on Health Care Issues under the jurisdiction of their Committee on Doctrine.

The 214-15 vote followed a debate that offered the only hint of controversy in an otherwise quiet first day of the Nov. 14-16 fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore.

At least one bishop expressed concern that the addition of the third subcommittee was working against the intention of the bishops when they streamlined the committee structure with the USCCB reorganization in 2008.

"If we keep adding more and more committees, we will end up back where we started from," with a need for more funding and more staff, said Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Joliet, Ill.

But Bishop George V. Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Priorities and Plans, and Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington, chairman of the Committee on Doctrine, said the new subcommittee would be funded and staffed using existing resources.

Archbishop Henry J. Mansell of Hartford, Conn., said he was "strongly in favor" of the new subcommittee because health care is part of "the Gospel mission of the church" and involves "billions and billions of dollars in funding."

"We run the risk of losing a major ministry of the church if we don't keep a close eye on health care issues," he said.

Bishop Kevin W. Vann of Fort Worth, Texas, said such a committee could be "a vehicle where (health care) concerns can be dealt with before they become problematic."

The absence of such a panel would send the message that “we don’t care, we’re not interested,” he added.

Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., said the subcommittee is needed “today more than ever” to assist bishops in a “tremendously challenging area.”

The new subcommittee succeeds a three-year task force on health care issues established in 2008 by Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, then USCCB president. The task force had its last meeting June 11, 2011.

According to the priorities and plans committee, the subcommittee will address such issues as guidance in implementing the bishops’ “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services,” non-Catholic hospitals in Catholic health systems, for-profit Catholic health care, canonical status of Catholic health facilities, conscience protection and health care reform.

Its membership will include representatives from the bishops’ committees on doctrine, canon law and church governance, pro-life activities, and domestic justice and human development, as well as “consultants from organizations that relate to the health care ministry of the church,” according to material distributed before the vote.