

Religious raise awareness on immigration

Extending a sense of welcome to immigrants was at the top of the agenda for more than 40 heads of women's and men's religious congregations who attended the April 20 Forum of Major Superiors.

Held at Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriottsville, the Forum included an open discussion session with Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, who also addressed the state of Catholic education and the apostolic visitation of institutes for women religious in the United States requested by Pope Benedict XVI.

Auxiliary Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden were also present to answer questions.

The religious leaders looked at ways of communicating their public support for immigrants, while also providing assistance to pastors in the form of a possible speakers' bureau of religious experts on immigration.

"Immigration is of critical importance," said Vincentian Father Sylvester Peterka, pastor of St. Cecilia and Immaculate Conception in Baltimore. "Because of 9/11 and the bad economy, people have become very protective of the borders. Excluding people is never an answer - that's the message we need to communicate to our people."

Father Peterka said he was pleased that religious communities are standing together in support of immigrants and of comprehensive immigration reform. It sends a positive message to the wider Catholic community, he said.

Carmelite Sister Colette Ackerman, prioress of a Carmelite monastery in Baltimore, said a committee of religious prepared a list of Web sites that offer resources on immigration. The document, after it is updated with additional sites, will be shared with parish leaders.

Responding to a question on whether he would be willing to meet with religious leaders in advance of the apostolic visitation to women's religious communities, Archbishop O'Brien said he was open to the idea.

The Vatican initiated the apostolic visitation to find out why the numbers of their members have decreased during the past 40 years and to look at the quality of life in the communities.

Archbishop O'Brien said he supports an open dialogue about the strengths and challenges of women's religious communities operating in the Baltimore Archdiocese.

"I'll tell you now that I'm pretty pleased," said Archbishop O'Brien, who hailed religious communities for their outreach to the poor and their work in health and education.

Monsignor Robert L. Hartnett, executive director of schools planning and pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex, highlighted the progress of a comprehensive study of the Catholic school system now underway to develop a plan to strengthen Catholic education. He said the top concerns are mission, finance, governance and best practices in Catholic schools.

"Some schools are really tottering now, and we're feverishly working to stabilize them," Archbishop O'Brien said, noting that the archdiocese won't wait for the results of the report to do what it can now to keep Catholic education healthy.

The Forum began in the 1970s under Archbishop William D. Borders and is held twice a year, according to Sister of St. Joseph Constance Gilder, the archbishop's delegate for religious.