

U.S. bishops' predecessors read 'signs of the times' in founding USCCB

"Happy 100th anniversary, my brother bishops," Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York said at a workshop on the centenary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 12.

Held the day before the bishops opened their fall general assembly in Baltimore, the workshop featured three talks, the first by Cardinal Dolan, head of a task force on the centenary observance.

He gave a detailed overview of how the bishops' conference arose out of a Catholic response to a national crisis — World War I. Cardinal Dolan also noted this "collegial tradition" goes back to meetings of priests called in the late 1780s by then-Father John Carroll, who would become the nation's first Catholic bishop.

The second speaker, Bishop Earl A. Boyea of Lansing, Michigan, reviewed "a menu of topics" of concern to the conference over the years. Retired Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Washington, gave the third talk, which a reflection on the spiritual and ecclesial principles of collegiality. Cardinal Dolan and Bishop Skylstad are both former USCCB presidents.

Cardinal Dolan led off with a prayer that said in part: "Heavenly father ... we thank you for our predecessors who looked into the signs of the times a hundred years ago and by the light of faith constantly sought to devote themselves more passionately to the service of Jesus and his church."

The USCCB began as National Catholic War Council, founded in 1917 to coordinate Catholic response to the war, including recruitment of military chaplains and a focus on displaced people and child welfare.

Once the war was over, the bishops decided they needed a permanent presence in the nation's capital to promote Catholic interests. In 1919, the war council became

the National Catholic Welfare Council. In 1922, the name was changed from “council” to “conference.”

In 1966, the structure was revamped to form the U.S. Catholic Conference as the public policy successor to the NCWC and to create the National Conference of Catholic Bishops as the episcopal conference called for by the Second Vatican Council. In 2001, after a reorganization process, the twin conferences were merged into the USCCB.

“What we’re celebrating today just didn’t start in 1917,” Cardinal Dolan said. “We bishops of the United States have a long legacy of working very closely together. This collegial tradition that we relish actually antedated even the establishment of this premier see of Baltimore in 1789.”

“Even before we had a bishop ... Father John Carroll invited his brother priests, about two dozen in number, to three meetings in White Marsh, Maryland — 1783, 1786, 1789,” he said.

Father Carroll, a Jesuit, “knew the value of us coming together to confront together pastoral problems,” Cardinal Dolan explained. “John Carroll of course was a quintessential American who believed that a common purpose and a plan hooked to some type of organization could provide the structure necessary to deal with most of our pastoral problems.”

Many of the issues on the agenda of those early meetings, he said, are still priorities for the U.S. bishops at their annual assemblies: “marriage and family; the duties we as Catholics have, like Easter and holy days; the disposition of parish funds and financial accountability; priestly vocations; religious education of our children.”

Bishop Boyea said he wanted to focus on “the middle years of our existence,” zeroing in on four areas: American, Catholic, episcopal and collegial.

“We Catholics have wanted to be seen as fully American,” he said. “As a national body of bishops our nationalism has been tested by the way we have related to our federal government. ... The bishops truly saw their interventions in the political life of the nation not merely as warding off dangers to the church, but as an

advancement of America itself.”

But this was not without tension, the bishop said. “While encouraging increased activity of the federal government in some arenas, the bishops also reminded the government of the strictures of the principle of subsidiarity in other areas of society.”

The Catholic nature of the conference “was most manifest in the engagement of the American bishops at the Second Vatican Council,” Bishop Boyea said. The bishops as a body were not reluctant to discuss “foreign, domestic, ecclesial or secular” issues, but they “did not see how they were to relate to an ecumenical council as a united conference,” he said.

Then they decided to hold their annual NCWC meeting in Rome. Regular meetings of the U.S. bishops as a group continued until the final session of the council. Back home they discussed the work of Vatican II and gave their input on the urgent need as they saw, for example, for a conciliar church-state document.

“Slowly the bishops had united their activities as members of the NCWC and as members of the ecumenical council,” Bishop Boyea said.

The episcopal nature of the bishops’ conference is seen in the “teaching activity of the conference,” he said. As an example, he recounted various events that took place before Blessed Pope Paul VI issued his 1968 encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*” affirming the church’s prohibition of artificial birth control.

As the Vatican studied the issue, Bishop Boyea said, the U.S. government expected a change in church teaching on birth control, leading Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, a Catholic, to promote contraceptive services in Latin America as one way to address poverty.

The U.S. bishops wanted to issue a statement supporting the teaching but a Vatican official advised against it, Bishop Boyea said. Then they were told the pope would allow a statement challenging the state’s authority to deal with these matters, but not addressing “the doctrinal question” still being studied.

So the U.S. bishops declared that a decision on birth limitation was properly the role

of the family, not the government. "They also warned of the dangers in promoting a contraceptive way of life," Bishop Boyea said.

But they felt "completely constrained" by the Vatican's delay on the issue and the bishops' conference "has since learned the great value of a vigorous educational stance in the teachings about right to life and religious liberty," Bishop Boyea said. "Focusing more on the formation of laity than on governmental activities has in fact led to greater lay awareness and action."

The conference's "collegial" nature, Bishop Boyea said, finally took root, once those bishops who feared a national body would usurp their own authority were reassured this would not take place. At their 1966 annual assembly, they set about organizing the structure of what was at that time their twin conferences, the USCC and NCCB, by electing officers and establishing various committees and conference departments.

Bishop Syklstad offered a reflection on "the spirit of affective and effective collegiality among the bishops."

"We know ourselves to be shepherds in the church who serve in union with our Holy Father," he said. "From the very beginning (of the church), we see a band of brother bishops accepting the mission given by Jesus to go out to the whole world."

"We bishops gather for meetings searching out ever new opportunities and directions, deeply appreciating our mutual responsibilities which take on so many manifestations. In a sense when we meet we bring our diocesan family along with us," Bishop Skylstad said. "We do not shepherd in isolation."

He said the collegial relationship the bishops have with one another "should be enhanced and strengthened by our relationship with the people we serve."

"We should be masters of loving our people, listening to them as people who are very important in our lives and in the life of our broader church," the bishop said.

He said he and his brother bishops need to consider "as we scan our lives and ministries as bishops" new opportunities to be "more effective in our ministry."

Bishop Skylstad described practical steps he plans to take for more “affective” and “effective” collegiality, such as: affirming “in my heart each time I gather with brother bishops that this is a grace” and seeking out a fellow bishop he may not agree with on various issues, not to discuss those issues but to get to know him better.

He also said he would learn about and getting involved in an area of episcopal ministry such as social justice or youth; quote the work of another bishop in a talk he plans to give; and be with the poor and others “on the periphery at least once a month “to be the face of Jesus’ love for them.”

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