

The Bishops' Dispirited Agenda

By Thomas J. Reese, S.J.

Meeting in San Antonio June 17-19, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has an agenda that will keep it busy but it will not deal with the real issues facing the church: how to interact with Obama and how to respond to the exodus of one third of Catholics from the church.

Once again the bishops will discuss and vote on new English translations of liturgical prayers. Over the last few years, the bishops have gradually adopted new translations that are worse than the ones in current use because of the Vatican fetish for word-for-word translations of Latin texts. When this project is finally finished, it will be imposed on American parishes.

The inability of the U.S. bishops to fight off this stupid idea is tragic.

Not only are the translations bad, the poor parish priests are going to have to use these prayers and explain them to their people. Most priests are simply going to say, "The bishop says we have to do this, so don't blame me."

How will the people react? By accident, the new translation was tested out in South Africa and the response was overwhelmingly negative. The people complained. They did not think it was an improvement. They saw no reason for the change.

Does the Vatican or the U.S. bishops see this as forecasting a disaster when the new translation is implemented worldwide? No. Market testing, beta sites, learning from experience and listening to the people are not part of the hierarchy's lexicon. "We know what's best. Full speed ahead!"

The bishops will also get a progress report on the pastoral plan for marriage. This might better be called a "dogmatic plan," since the Committee on Doctrine appears to have had more to say about the text than the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth. The result may well be an abstract rehash of church doctrine, which will not touch any hearts or respond to the pastoral needs of real people.

Finally, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, vice president of the USCCB, will report on the USCCB's five priorities: Cultural Diversity in the Church, Faith Formation and Sacramental Practice, Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Strengthening Marriage and Promotion of Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life.

One has to give the bishops credit for attempting to set priorities; and who can say object to any of them? But I have watched this ineffective exercise for too many years to expect anything of value to come from it. The priorities are so general and inclusive that they give little direction to the church. And notice the missing words: justice, peace, the poor.

Absent from the agenda is a discussion of how the bishops should interact with the Obama administration. Will the vocal bishops continue to set a negative tone or will the conference seek common ground with the administration on issues of poverty, health care, nuclear disarmament, immigration reform, global warming, the economy, peace, etc., while politely disagreeing on abortion and stem cell research?

Since there is no episcopal leadership pushing for civil engagement, the Obama administration should not hold its breath. The only thing that may turn the bishops around is a roaringly successful visit of Obama with the pope in July. Word is that the pope is looking forward to the visit. How many bishops would meet with Obama if he visited their diocese?

Nor do the bishops give any indication that they know they are on a sinking ship. One third of Catholics have left the church. Any other organization would try to find out why and develop a plan to get back their members or customers. Have the bishops commissioned a study of these former Catholics? No. Data doesn't count.

The bishops, like the leaders of GM, Chrysler and the Republican Party, think that old strategies (emphasize orthodoxy and play to your base) will work. They blame the exodus on secularism, consumerism, individualism and sin.

The fundamental problem is that the bishops have lost what John O'Malley, S.J., refers to as the spirit of Vatican II. This spirit involved a new way of looking and talking about issues.

The council spoke in a new style, a style different from all previous councils. It eschewed words implying punishment, surveillance, hostility, distrust and coerced behavior-modification that characterized previous councils. It employed words that espoused a new model for Christian behavior--not new, of course, to the Christian tradition as such, but new to council vocabulary. I am referring to words like brothers and sisters, cooperation, partnership, human family, conscience, collegiality and especially dialogue.

In the May 25 issue of America, O'Malley argues that in his speeches at Grant Park and at Notre Dame, Obama "spoke in accord with the spirit of Vatican II. In those two addresses, as well as in his other speeches, he called for civility, for the end of name-

calling, and for a willingness to work together to deal with our common problems, including abortion, rather than a stand-off determination to impose one's principles without reckoning what the cost to the common good might be."

"Is it not ironic," concludes Father O'Malley, "that not a bishop but the president of the United States should today be the most effective spokesperson for that spirit?" The bishops need to return to the spirit of the council, otherwise they will be leaders of a church that continues to lose members.

[COMMONWEAL and Fr. Tom Reese S.J give their opinions about the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in San Antonio.](#)