

Interview with Bishop William Skylstad
President, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

By JOHN L. ALLEN, JR.

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Bishop William Skylstad, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, sat down for a wide-ranging interview with NCR Oct. 18 in Rome about issues facing the American church.

NCR: You're here for biannual meetings between the officers of the U.S. bishops' conference and the Vatican. What do you get from these trips?

Bishop William Skylstad: It helps to coordinate the work of the conference with the Holy See, and it goes both ways. We bring our work here, apprise them of decisions the conference is facing, and we also listen to their input and concerns. That can be especially helpful on international relations, and how we interact with other countries.

We had the chance for a half-hour session with the Holy Father, for which we're grateful. Even though he's reduced the number of his appointments, his schedule is still daunting. We were the first on the list for Monday, and I was aghast at the number of other items on his schedule that morning. We also have the chance to connect with American clergy who are in Rome; for example, we had lunch at the Villa Stritch [a home for American clergy who work in the Holy See, currently with 27 residents]. We also try to see other American prelates; we had dinner, for example, with Cardinal [Edmund] Szoka.

You've come in a moment that falls between the Regensburg crisis and the pope's trip to Turkey. What do you pick up about Islam?

I sense a very strong commitment to dialogue as we move into the future. What the Holy Father presented in Regensburg certainly caused a great deal of discussion, some of it supportive, some critical, but my impression is that he's determined that dialogue with Muslims must continue. We had a meeting today with Cardinal Paul Poupard [President of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue], and he gave us a strong affirmation of what we're doing with regard to Catholic/Muslim dialogue in the United States. We have three major dialogues, one on the West Coast, one in the Midwest, and one on the Atlantic Coast. Cardinal Poupard told us that this work is very much appreciated by the Holy See, and he urged us to continue.

Did you sense much apprehension about Benedict's trip to Turkey?

Not really. What I heard was a strong commitment to going forward, and the need to continue the dialogue with the Muslim community.

It's striking that in the immediate wave of angry post-Regensburg reactions, there wasn't much blowback from American Muslims. How do you explain that?

To some extent, it may have to do with the relations we've established with the Muslim community. Our dialogues have been going on for quite a few years, in some cases they're 10 to 15 years old. This is very important, and it will continue to be important.

Do you think American Muslims today are in a similar position to American Catholics 50 years ago, with a doctrine of church/state relations that doesn't match their experience? If so, could they be a catalyst for wider reform?

There's probably something to that, and there has been discussion about whether the Muslim community in American society can be a leaven in the larger Muslim world. There's ongoing contact between American Muslims and other Islamic cultures, and that could positively impact relations. At the moment, this may be more of a vision, or a hoped-for reality, as opposed to what we actually see. But it's a good vision. For the most part in the United States, we have a wonderful and respectful relationship with Muslims, with reverence for all religious traditions on both sides.

How should the church try to promote reform in Islam?

The whole question of how to approach this dialogue is a big one for us in the United States. We hope that our respect and reverence will be reciprocated in other places – this is a significant issue. We ask for reciprocity, especially on religious freedom. Of course, our own history in that regard is not perfect, but we've grown into a whole other reality. We hope that what we do in the United States will be a witness in terms of living together.

If the church pushes too hard on this, do we risk making it look like a “Western” exercise?

That's why I emphasize that we have to be living models ourselves. That will naturally generate momentum. I was on the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services a number of years ago, and I visited Morocco along with some CRS staff, who in this case were almost all Muslim. I found a tremendous admiration for the church there in terms of its commitment to economic development, its advocacy, and so on. It's an example of the impact of American Catholicism in the Islamic world.

Yet Morocco recalled its ambassador in protest over Benedict's comments in Regensburg. Where did that good will go?

There was a stronger initial reaction, I think, than where it was when things eventually settled down a week or two later. The Holy Father's meeting with the Muslim ambassadors seemed quite positive. There was an initial flurry of over-reactions, but by the end it could very well be the case that both sides end up more committed to addressing issues of religious violence and peace.

Any update on the possibility of a papal trip to the United States?

There's some discussion about the possibility of a trip to the United Nations, although it's still hard to say when that might take place. It's connected to the transfer of leadership in the UN, and will depend to some extent on who the next Secretary General is and what that person's ideas on a papal visit would be.

So you see the possibility of Benedict coming to the United States as linked to a visit to the UN?

I think so, at least initially. Cardinal [William] Keeler would have loved to see him come to the rededication of the Cathedral in Baltimore in conjunction with the meeting of the bishops' conference next month, but unfortunately it just wasn't possible.

In general terms, what have you discussed in your Vatican meetings this week?

One important matter is the proposed restructuring of the bishops' conference, which we'll vote on during our November meeting in Baltimore. We've been working on this for a couple of years. It's the first time in many years we've looked seriously at trying to do things better, more efficiently, saving our resources where possible. The restructuring will probably mean some consolidation of offices, some reduction in committees, and efforts of a similar nature. There's a great deal of nervousness because of the possibility of job cuts, which of course I understand. We'll try to do as much as we can through attrition, and we've had a hiring freeze in place for some time. In the end, the aim is to be good stewards, and to make sure that we're focused on our mission.

This week, one question we've been talking about as we move around is what the financial implications of our restructuring might be for the Holy See. If we cut the subsidies that dioceses pay to the conference, what will that mean for our canon 1271 contributions to the Holy See each year? [Note: Canon 1271 states, "In view of their bond of unity and charity and in accord with the resources of their dioceses, bishops are to assist in procuring those means whereby the Apostolic See can properly provide for its service of the universal Church according to the conditions of the times."] Will that contribution go down? It's something we have to sort out.

Did you get any reaction?

At this stage we're just sharing information. They're watching the situation carefully. They've been aware that a similar kind of restructuring in dioceses has been going on for some time. They're aware of the reality of what we're dealing with. I think in general terms they're approving of our effort to be good stewards, to focus on the mission and priorities of the conference.

No one said anything like, 'Whatever you do, don't cut the annual contribution to the Vatican?'

No, I haven't heard that.

We're just a month away from mid-term elections in the United States, and the 2008 presidential race is in a sense already underway. Do you anticipate that the bishops will revisit the conclusions of the McCarrick Commission on the question of communion for politicians who don't follow church teaching?

One important project for us is reissuing the "Faithful Citizenship" document, trying to form consciences about the issues that face our society. I hope it's an encouragement to each bishop to engage legislators at the local level, as well as for us to build on our national advocacy efforts. As far as the question of how we relate to Catholic politicians, this will probably have to be revisited with each electoral cycle.

We'll have to look at the lay of the land and see if there's a need for another committee in the future.

Do you suspect that in 2008 you'll be where you were in 2004, with each bishop deciding for himself what stance to take?

I suspect that's the best we can do at this moment. There's obviously a great deal of sensitivity in this particular area. There's an ongoing need to clarify our expectations of a Catholic legislator, and we need to work that out in dialogue with people in political leadership.

Are there efforts in that direction?

There have been some small meetings, but we need to be very sensitive to the need for this dialogue to happen at the local level. We don't want in any way to pre-empt the role of the local bishop in his dialogue with legislators in his area.

Critics would say this means candidates are held hostage to accidents of geography – treated one way in this diocese, a different way in another. Further, they would say, it creates the appearance of division and confusion. Isn't there an argument for trying to think as one body?

It's a complex situation. Each bishop has the responsibility for his own area, and it must be the individual bishop who makes decisions in specific instances. On the other hand, we obviously are connected in many ways as a church in the United States, and any decision made by one bishop can reflect upon the conference and on the entire church. Our experience last time shows it can be tough to put these things together. I think we'll continue to have dialogue, but in the end we have to respect the particularities of each case.

Do you expect any further intervention from the Holy See on this question, such as a document?

No, I don't. Some have speculated about the possibility of something coming from the Vatican, but I have no indication that's the case.

Every time it seems we've turned a corner on the sexual abuse crisis, another diocese files for bankruptcy or another scandal erupts. Is there any sense in which an end is in sight?

We will always be dealing with this issue to some extent. We have to be very careful about saying, 'This is over.' Implementation of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and the "Essential Norms" has given us a clear sense of direction in addressing issues of abuse and protecting our children and young people, both in the parish and in the broader society. I would say that the effort to do this well has been massive – our "Safe Environment" campaign, for example, which has been truly a massive undertaking, or the auditing we're doing. Of course, how we ought to audit continues to be a matter of discussion, especially when you're talking about large dioceses that may have tens of thousands of employees and so on, but it will go forward.

All this has required a huge, huge commitment on our part, but I pick up from bishops that we have to do what it takes to provide a safe environment. We have to

address the reality as best we can, while also acknowledging that all the safeguards, training and supervision in the world is not foolproof. That's why it's also important to train young people to be sensitive to signs of inappropriate behaviour and possible abuse. But the system will never be perfect, no matter how hard we try.

Will there be additional bankruptcies of dioceses?

It just depends on how the financial picture unfolds, on what the levels of future settlements may be. We have to deal fairly with victims, but at the same time we must preserve our mission as church. I think the recent decision in Davenport to file for bankruptcy, for example, was their way of addressing both of these issues.

You wouldn't rule out further bankruptcies?

You can't rule it out. If there's a high number of potential victims and significant litigation that could seriously impact the diocese, it will be an option.

Are Vatican officials comfortable with this dimension of what's happening in the States?

Nobody's comfortable with Chapter 11, but it's a reality we have to deal with. This is really unploughed ground in the church, so in church terms it's a cutting-edge approach to dealing with a serious problem. Lots of significant issues come up, such as how to define in terms of civil law the relationship between the bishop and the assets of a diocese. My sense is that the Holy See is watching very closely our experience in the United States. They're very interested in information on how the Chapter 11 proceedings unfold. Of course, it's still early to draw conclusions, since only one diocese to date has successfully emerged from Chapter 11, which is Tucson. Portland and my own diocese, Spokane, are still underway.

Back in 2001 and 2002, when the prospect of bankruptcy was first floated, Vatican officials raised concerns about putting church assets under civil control. Have the dioceses that declared bankruptcy had to ask Vatican permission?

I don't know the details of every case, but I haven't heard of that happening. Under canon law, there's a limit beyond which one has to ask permission of the Holy See to 'alienate' assets. [Note: For dioceses with a Catholic population of a half-million or more, the limit is \$10 million; for others, it's \$5 million. 'Alienate' means to divest the fixed assets of a diocese]. Of course, bankruptcy itself is not alienation, but if there's a large settlement package as part of the deal, and if you have to sell assets to contribute to the pot above those limits, then you might have to ask permission. In most cases, though, the funds are a mix of diocesan money and contributions from insurers.

Earlier in the month, a prosecutor in Los Angeles suggested the possibility of charges against Cardinal Roger Mahony related to abuse that happened on his watch. Do you think it's possible a sitting bishop might face a criminal indictment?

There's always the potential for it.

Have you talked as a conference about what, if anything, you would do in such a case?

We really haven't had a conversation about it. It's a relatively new question.

Safe to say you're hoping it doesn't come to that?

Very much so.

There's been a fair bit of speculation about a forthcoming document that would broaden permission for celebration of the pre-Vatican II Mass. Have you discussed this in your Vatican meetings?

I haven't picked up anything on it, no. I haven't had any inkling of something like that, though I'm aware of the rumours. Of course, we've heard rumours like this several times in the past.

Do you see a pastoral need for such a document?

In my diocese of Spokane, we don't have the older Mass celebrated, but in a neighbouring diocese it is available, just about 50 miles away. I wouldn't know how many people, if any, make the trip. In my years as bishop, there simply hasn't been great demand for Mass according to the older rite. If there were a significant number of people wanting it, I would discuss it with my Presbyteral Council and others and make a decision, but to date we just haven't had many requests. It's been very minimal over the years.

What are your own thoughts about allowing wider use of the pre-Vatican II Mass?

We're a church of unity and of common worship. The thrust of Vatican II calls for more active participation on the part of the faithful in the liturgy itself, and from my standpoint trying to move further in that direction would be most helpful. On the other hand, the Holy Father is trying to reconcile with the Lefebvrite group, whose members have an attachment to the older Mass. To date, those efforts have not been successful, but we are always in the business of reconciling, healing and unifying. Perhaps some further accommodation can be found.

If this document appears, what impact do you think it will have?

It depends on what part of the country you're in, but in any event the numbers are relatively small. The bishop has to decide when and where it will be pastorally effective.

So you would not want a 'universal indult' that doesn't require any approval from the bishop?

It's very important that the bishop have this responsibility. I would hope that somehow there would be this encouragement or directive that the local bishop is able to make decisions about the liturgical life of his diocese.

What was your reaction to the anonymous letter attributed to New York priests critical of Cardinal Edward Egan?

The fact that it's anonymous makes it somewhat suspicious. If a person feels strongly about a grievance with a bishop, then he or she should go to the bishop rather than doing it anonymously. It's really important to work in and through the structures that exist to change what needs to be changed. In this case, the Presbyteral Council responded

supportively for the cardinal. We have parish and diocesan councils, we have presbyteral councils, and it's important to use these structures.