

U.S. Bishops conference head decries society's growing coarseness

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BALTIMORE — The leader of America's Roman Catholic bishops called his colleagues Monday to fight against a coarseness that he said was infecting the church and society at large, and to unite in promoting human dignity through faith.

In his opening address at the U.S. bishops' fall meeting, Bishop William Skylstad said "debasing personal attacks" have replaced healthy public debate, and that popular culture and the news media have degraded human dignity with violence and vulgar depictions of sex.

"There is a mocking reduction of sexuality, debasing it from God's beautiful gift of creation to little more than casual chemistry and inconsequential recreation," said Skylstad, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Sometimes it seems that people are no longer seen as children of God but as little more than a disposable commodity."

Skylstad, of Spokane, Wash., said he has also detected a cruelty in discussions within the church, among people who "presume the worst of intentions or motivations of others."

"The point seems to be not to seek the truth or to build up the Body of Christ, but to strive for a sort of victory by overcoming others, preferably by crushing those who disagree," he said. "Our unity cannot simply devolve into an endless debate that would keep us from articulating our faith in a definitive way."

Skylstad made the comments ahead of discussions over the next two days that are meant to emphasize core church teachings, especially for often uninvolved Catholics.

The bishops will also consider new guidelines on ministry to gay parishioners, explaining the theological underpinnings of the Catholic mandate that marriage must be limited to one man and one woman.

The attention to core teach-

ings comes as the 64 million-member American church faces a shortage of priests, low rates of Mass attendance and a massive influx of Hispanic immigrants.

Diocesan budgets also are stretched thin. Bishops nationwide have been closing older parishes that are too expensive to maintain, while trying to cover rising costs for operating their schools. And several dioceses are still negotiating settlements in the millions of dollars over claims of clergy sex abuse. The cases of three of the four dioceses that have sought bankruptcy protection from molestation claims remain unresolved.

Skylstad, whose own diocese has sought bankruptcy protection, only mentioned the crisis briefly, saying the abuse crisis made church leaders even more aware of how children often are hurt most by adults who fail to promote human dignity.

To adjust to the financial pressures on the church, the bishops this week will consid-

er restructuring the conference's Washington headquarters. Under the proposal, American dioceses would send less money to the conference, which would in turn cut jobs and committees.

The bishops have also proposed a new set of priorities for their streamlined conference through 2011, including an initiative supporting marriage, increasing the number of candidates for the priesthood and improving education for Catholics on church teaching.

The meeting runs through Thursday, but the bishops have decided to conduct more business than usual behind closed doors. This week, public sessions will end Tuesday. In previous years, the conference only held a half-day executive session at its fall meeting, but a spokeswoman said the extra time was needed for "prayer and reflection."

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A day that won't be forgotten

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598 b.c.). He was a striking contrast to his father. Jehoiachim lived in personal extravagance (Jeremiah 22:13-15), pursued dishonest gain, and set his eyes and his heart "to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence" (22:17). As noted in last week's lesson, Jehoiachim cut up into pieces a scroll from Jeremiah and cast the pieces into a fire (36:22-24).

During Jehoiachim's reign, King Nebuchadnezzar came to power in Babylon as Egypt declined in influence. Jehoiachim switched his loyalty to Babylon in an attempt to keep up with the times, but rebelled after three years (2 Kings 24:1). The Scriptures do not indicate how Jehoiachim died; possibly he was assassinated.

Jehoiachin, Jehoiachim's son, ruled for only three months. He was taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 b.c. His later release from prison and elevation to a position of honor in Babylon is mentioned in 2 Kings 25:27-30 and Jeremiah 52:31-34.

Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was another son of Josiah. Zedekiah reigned for 11 years until Jerusalem fell in 586 b.c. Weak and unstable, he refused to heed the counsel of Jeremiah to surrender to the Babylonians (Jeremiah 27:12-15; 38:17,

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