

Nonprofit aims to aid US diocese governance

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A group of prominent Catholic business leaders and academics announced yesterday that they have formed a nonprofit organization aimed at professionalizing the governance and administration of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, which has been reeling from a string of management and financial problems.

The new group called for the church to solicit nominations from clergy and lay people for candidates to be bishops and for bishops to consult parishioners and parish employees before naming new pastors. Also recommended were a broad series of administrative changes, including the appointment of a chief administrative officer for every diocese, publication of annual financial statements that are "reader-friendly," and the initiation of performance reviews for priests, nuns, auxiliary bishops, and other church employees.

The new organization, called the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, says it will aim to gather the expertise of accomplished lay Catholics and use it to transform the nation's largest religious denomination. The Catholic Church in recent years has faced a clergy abuse scandal attributed in part to poor management, a personnel crisis because of the dwindling number of priests, bankruptcy filings by three dioceses, and a raft of parish and school closings.

The founder of the round table, former Boston College chairman Geoffrey T. Boisi, said that together, the nation's dioceses employ more than 1 million people and have annual operating budgets of almost \$100 billion. Boisi, who is also a retired executive of Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase, cited diminishing attendance at Mass, a deterioration in financial support, and an increasing reliance on lay ministers with variable levels of training as major challenges facing the church.

"Many of these issues have been brewing for a while, but the scandal has brought them to the fore, and one key thing that has to be done is the reestablishment of a relationship of trust and cooperation through communication and transparency and systems of accountability," Boisi said. "We're hoping people are going to view this [new group] as a catalyst, and as an important step in the assembling of lay and religious leaders to creatively focus our collective skills on addressing some of the important and urgent management issues facing the church."

Signaling a willingness by some church leaders to consider the recommendations, two bishops from small dioceses appeared at a Washington, D.C., news conference announcing the round table. Members of the agenda-setting body of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the administrative committee, invited Boisi and other round-table leaders to join them for lunch today in Washington. Boisi said the round table has also met individually with several bishops and has been collaborating with a number of organizations representing church workers.

A spokesman for the bishops, Monsignor Francis J. Maniscalco, offered a noncommittal response to the formation of the group. "We have many independent groups in the church," he said. "They will go about their business, and it will up to the bishops to consider what they recommend."

Among its 27 priority recommendations, the round table called for strengthening a little-known national board, called the National Advisory Council, by publicizing its membership and allowing it to "initiate, as well as react to," proposals for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. The round table also offered 21 longer-term recommendations, including a call for a "vigorous training and education program for new bishops," focusing on management skills, as well as for the development of a process for evaluating homilies and music at worship services.

The round table says it intends to do research on problems facing the church and will attempt to call attention to the practices of dioceses and parishes that are successfully confronting those problems. The group will be headquartered in the offices of a Washington-based organization of Catholic philanthropists called Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, and that organization, known by the acronym FADICA, will help raise an estimated annual budget of \$500,000 for the round table's first three years.

"Strangely enough, we seem to be getting some pretty positive feedback from the hierarchy, and I don't know what that's about other than that we've been at it for a while and they are up against some formidable financial and human resource challenges and they are beginning to see that they do need help," said FADICA's president, Francis Butler, a round-table participant who in recent years has been critical of the bishops, saying they have failed to adequately disclose church finances.

Boisi first pulled together a group of prominent Catholic business leaders and academics to meet in the summer of 2003 at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. After that initial gathering was criticized by some on the right for including too many liberal voices, Boisi invited many of the critics to a second gathering, last summer at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. The approximately 200 participants in the Wharton gathering included prominent academics and business executives, several Catholic journalists and authors, and 12 bishops. Among those from Boston were the Rev. J. Donald Monan, chancellor of Boston College, and John M. Connors Jr., chairman of Hill, Holliday, Connors, Cosmopolos.

"The bishops will pay attention if we can be clear that this is not dogma we're talking about, but modern management practices," said Dr. Mary Jane England, the president of Regis College in Weston, who participated in both gatherings. "This would free them up a bit so they don't have to spend all their time on fiscal stuff."

One potential critic, Brian Saint-Paul, the editor of Crisis magazine, a conservative Catholic journal, said he would wait to see who is on the organization's board before coming to a conclusion about its agenda. Saint-Paul's predecessor, Deal Hudson, was a leading critic of the first Boisi gathering.

"They have not yet assembled their board of directors, and once they do that, if it's exclusively made up of Catholic dissenters, we'll know their agenda is something other than what they've been saying," Saint-Paul said. "I do have a concern that this is a front to smuggle a left-of-center theology into the church, but I don't want to prejudge. If their goal is to provide managerial wisdom, that's great, and the bishops could use that. There are legitimate improvements that can be made on diocesan structure."

Several participants said the group is not tackling ideologically-charged issues, such as the ordination of women, but instead is focused exclusively on management concerns.

"I told a number of people that President Reagan would have been really surprised at my being characterized as a left-wing zealot," said round-table member Thomas J. Healey, an assistant Treasury secretary under Reagan who is an adjunct lecturer in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. "The issues we are focusing on are not ideological issues, but are enormously important. The whole design of the group is to incorporate everybody."

Among the participants in the second meeting was James E. Post, a Boston University management professor who serves as president of Voice of the Faithful, a nationwide reform organization headquartered in Newton.

"The sexual abuse crisis highlighted shortcomings in financial affairs, administrative systems, and personnel management," Post said. "The laity has enormous expertise to share in these areas, and the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management can be an important vehicle for doing so."

The meeting at Wharton included about a dozen participants from Boston, many of them connected to Boston College. The round table also includes two officials of the Archdiocese of Boston, the Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, the president of Catholic Charities and a former head of Harvard Divinity School, and the Rev. Edward M. O'Flaherty, director of the archdiocesan office of ecumenical and interreligious affairs, as well as a Boston College trustee.