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Nation's bishops, Catholic college heads to have local dialogues

By Jerry Filteau

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- At a Jan. 10 meeting in Washington, the U.S. bishops' Committee on Education approved a set of questions to guide local dialogues nationwide between diocesan bishops and the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities in their diocese.

The dialogues are to be conducted by May 3, the date on which "The Application of 'Ex Corde Ecclesiae' for the United States" took effect five years ago.

"Ex Corde Ecclesiae," Latin for "from the heart of the church," is Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, which set norms to assure the Catholic mission and identity of Catholic colleges and universities worldwide and called on national bishops' conferences to establish implementing norms applying the general norms within the context of their own countries.

Bishop Robert J. McManus of Worcester, Mass., chairman of the education committee, said in an interview after the meeting that the guiding questions were themselves the result of a dialogue process between bishops and Catholic college and university presidents.

"The first question has to do with Catholic identity and character (of the colleges and universities)," he said. "The second has to do with communion with the local church. The third has to do with incorporation of the spirit and norms of 'Ex Corde' and the application.

"The fourth question -- I think a very important question -- has to do with the continued dialogue," he said. "What are the plans and method for continuing this dialogue that really was engendered by 'Ex Corde Ecclesiae' and the specific American application?"

Auxiliary Bishop Walter J. Edyvean of Boston, who chairs the committee's Subcommittee on Bishops and Catholic College and University Presidents, said the five-year progress review was called for by the U.S. implementation norms, not the Vatican document.

He said the review process does not address some specific questions that could arise in some of the local dialogues, such as possible revision of some institutions' statutes in light of the new Vatican and U.S. norms. "That question would depend on individual bishops and presidents," he said.

Bishop McManus said the guiding question on incorporation of the spirit and norms of the Vatican and U.S. documents includes a reference to dialogue on the implementation of the

ecclesiastical "mandatum," or authorization to teach, that the norms say a Catholic theologian must have to teach in a Catholic institution of higher learning.

For many years the "mandatum" requirement and how it would be implemented were among the most debated issues in the norms.

Another difficult issue for many U.S. Catholic institutions has been a Vatican norm that says the majority of a Catholic institution's teachers should be Catholic.

Bishop McManus said he recently read that some Catholic colleges have said that currently "the majority of the faculty is not Roman Catholic, which is a fact of life."

"But I also read very recently that, as a result of the discussions between diocesan bishops and presidents of Catholic colleges and universities, what has come to the surface is a realization that one significant way to maintain a Catholic identity is what is being called 'mission-oriented hiring.'"

He said this means that in filling a faculty position the institution may hope to hire a qualified Catholic applicant, but if the person being hired is not Catholic, it will assure that that person "agrees with and says he or she will be supportive of the mission of the Catholic university or college."

The relationship of faculty to Catholic identity and mission is the major theme to be discussed at the Feb. 4-6 annual meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. The ACCU, whose members are the presidents of the country's Catholic higher education institutions, collaborated with the education committee in drafting the guiding questions that will set the framework for the upcoming five-year review dialogues.

Richard Yanikoski, ACCU president, said that from the feedback he receives from bishops and presidents, "in almost all cases the dialogue ... has been positive, helpful, and I think bodes well both for the institutions and the dioceses in fostering a constructive and more full-featured relationship than has been typical in the last several decades."

"The campuses are doing a great deal more to enrich the faith community and the social service and social justice missions of the church than most of the American Catholic public is aware," he said.

Both he and the two bishops cited "Promising Practices," a recently published book in which 40 bishops and presidents talk about their recent experiences in mutual dialogue and collaboration and the assistance the educational institutions give to the life of the local church, as representative of the kind of positive experiences emerging out of bishop-president dialogues around the country.

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