

Catholic bishops split on views of economy

by [David Gibson](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue

A divided U.S. Catholic hierarchy has failed to agree on a statement about the economy after a debate that revealed sharp differences over the kind of social justice issues that were once a hallmark of the bishops' public profile.

The defeat of the document, titled "The Hope of the Gospel in Difficult Economic Times," followed an hour of unusually intense debate among the 230 bishops gathered in Baltimore for their annual mid-November meeting. It left many of them openly frustrated that the prelates have not made a joint statement about the nation's economic woes four years after the recession hit.

"This document is dead," New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said on November 13 with obvious disappointment. He brought the gavel down on the debate after it failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed for passage.

The failure of the bishops to pass the statement was extraordinary; in June, the bishops had authorized a special committee to write a brief reflection for consideration at this meeting, and the conference rarely rejects something produced by one of its committees.

But the bishops did not receive the draft until they arrived for the meeting, and what they found was something that pleased almost no one. The document was long, coming in at 14 pages, and many said it was dominated by spiritual terminology that ignored the roots of the economic crisis and did not suggest solutions provided by Catholic social teaching.

The first draft gave short shrift to a century of social justice encyclicals from the popes, including those of Benedict XVI, and did not even mention the USCCB's landmark 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All," which has been hailed for challenging economic injustice in the U.S.

Moreover, there was criticism that the document repeatedly highlighted the church's opposition to gay marriage and abortion and its support for school vouchers in ways that distracted from the economic issues that were supposed to be at the heart of the message.

The bishops also complained that the document overlooked issues of tax fairness, budget cuts to the safety net, the economic plight of the middle class, regulation of the financial sector and greed and criminality in the lending industry. "I think people will look at this document and say it's a real 'churchy' document, they will say it's in language that is too abstract, and they will say that it is unrelated to their experience," said Bishop Joseph Sullivan, a retired auxiliary bishop from Brooklyn.

The theme of the document was hope, but Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, California, the USCCB's point man on domestic policy, said that didn't come through. "Several bishops came up to me and said, 'I read your letter and I'm depressed,'" Blaire said.

That criticism was echoed by a range of other bishops. "My problem is that there is no sting and no bite," said Bishop Peter Rosazza, retired auxiliary bishop of Hartford, Connecticut. Added Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Washington: "I don't see that I would share this [document] with anyone or that it would make any difference."

Yet in a sign of the growing generational and ideological split among the bishops, some of the younger and more conservative bishops wanted to kill the statement because they believe the hierarchy should largely restrict their statements to matters of faith. They also view traditional Catholic social teaching with suspicion, maintaining that the church should emphasize private charity rather than government action to cure social ills.

"I think the best thing we can do is to scrap the document and go home and find some tangible and practical ways to help the poor," said Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, who dismissed the document as irrelevant. But many bishops, led by Dolan, stressed the urgency of saying something about the economy. They proposed a raft of amendments to try to make the statement more specific and relevant to impending economic decisions, such as the "fiscal cliff" budget negotiations in Congress.

Those efforts proved fruitless. Despite a willingness of some bishops to vote for the statement to salvage something from the effort, it failed to garner the 152 votes

needed—losing with a vote of 134 in favor, 85 against passage and nine abstentions. Dolan said he did not foresee any effort to revive the statement or draft another one in the coming year. —RNS

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