

## Why the U.S. bishops' group is a conference (Nov. 26, 2017)

### Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

Prayer and work marked the bishops' meeting in Baltimore on Nov. 11-16. Our fall gathering is the busiest and most well attended. We celebrated the 100th anniversary of our conference with talks, Mass and a dinner.

This started as the National Catholic War Council in 1917. The country was at war and families were stressed as their men left for armed service. For the duration and following, there was need to have an organized reception for people displaced by the war. Then it became a Welfare Council — the title did not have the connotations it does today.

The main offices and staff for the conference are in Washington, D.C. Many smaller meetings occur there and by distance conferencing.

With subsequent changes in purpose and titles, the Vatican (which would not be an independent state until 1929) requested that the bishops' organization be called a "conference." This is because we assemble to confer, not to exercise the governance that remains proper to individual bishops who head dioceses. Today we find similar conferences around the world.

In the United States and its territories, there are about 195 Latin Rite dioceses and 18 Eastern Rite (arch)eparchies. The bishops and eparchs and auxiliary bishops, as well as retired bishops, are invited to the plenary meetings.

There is not space here to outline this most recent assembly, which works in committees as well as an entirety with staff. Part of the time, invited observers and live TV are present. A couple of years ago, a media representative asked Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., "Why do the bishops have to meet in large hotels?" To which the cardinal replied, "We have to have enough room to accommodate you reporters."

The business of the conference includes mutual aid. This year's hurricanes, California fires and an earthquake in Mexico saw considerable efforts from Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Relief Services. Where Hurricane Katrina came and went from New Orleans in about a day, Harvey's wind and rain persisted for many days resulting in risen water that would not diminish during that time.

The presence of the Eastern bishops is a pointed reminder that thousands have been killed by wars in their home countries. Religious persecution is very real, and hundreds of thousands of their Catholic Christian people have been displaced, often to other nearby countries. There are about 1.5 million Syrian refugees living in non-permanent housing in Lebanon, a country of about 6 million people. Lebanon's land area is one-half the size of our diocese. With 65 million refugees around the world, there is no small upset that the United States hesitates to aid more of

these suffering people.

Yes, we have serious issues in the United States. Legal moves to retain our religious freedoms are constant. But the biggest challenge, based on the number of Catholic families affected, continues to be the government's hesitation to tackle immigration reform. Almost daily, across the country, we hear about families that are broken apart by deportations. Hispanic immigrants from 20 countries, mainly Mexico, are the most affected. Of particular interest are the DACA and Dreamers youth and young adults, including those from African and Asian countries.

DACA, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, was a program instituted to give standing to those who entered or remained in the United States illegally. These approximately 800,000 young people are called "Dreamers" after a 2001 federal action called The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. Their ability to retain documents and work legally while remaining here is under threat. Participants in this effort must have passed background checks for illegal or criminal activity. For many, this is the only country they have known.

The bishops continue to support the need for laws, and ones that meet 21st-century realities. We support the need for border security and the weeding out of criminal elements. Most of all, our local churches are working for ways to reduce unreasonable fears and to be good neighbors. When you look at our national Web site ([uscceb.org](http://uscceb.org)), you will see that we are trying to "put a face" on the challenges we face. Other people's children should not be an issue, they should be children, all of ours.

I am writing this just before Thanksgiving. I will be looking at our family's gathering as a celebration, but also a reminder of who we are trying to be.