

What is the bishops' conference?

-Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

Catholic bishops are organized into groups called conferences. Typically they are national (U.S.) or regional (Caribbean). Each has a mission that is similar. As you would read on the Web page for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org), our mission aims at collaboration, communion and assistance.

We collaborate on matters of religious and social importance. Various issues transcend diocesan and national interest, and all activities express our communion with each other and the Holy Father who is the supreme pastor of our Church. Over the past century, the accelerations of communication and the constant migration of peoples have influenced the way that we think of our relationship with Christ and each other. For example, we have an Argentinian pope who is the son of Italian immigrants.

Our U.S. bishops' conference is also an assist to individual dioceses and bishops. This happens in various ways. Most of us are aware of aid that was directed to places that experienced devastating storms. There are offices that offer direction for the renewal of liturgy and catechesis. One of the largest sustained national efforts remains the protection of children and youth over the past 15 years. I am the chair-elect of this particular committee. To be sure, many dioceses' protocols were established long before 2002. The conference also offers guidance in matters of Church governance and communications.

The USCCB sponsors Catholic Relief Services, which is our foreign assistance office. It is the one international U.S. Catholic organization governed and audited by the high standards of our conference. It moves into distressed areas to help people get on their feet after earthquakes, droughts, civil unrest or disease outbreaks. It teaches and helps people in collaboration with hundreds of partners worldwide. When its goal is accomplished, it leaves its work in the hands of local leadership.

In our country, the conference is at work in matters of evangelization, health care and immigration reform, among others. In a pluralistic society, it is not our role to shape every institution to be Catholic, but to work to maintain our religious liberty and conscience protections. There are offices of our conference that interact with governments and legislative bodies so that our unified voice is heard. This kind of activity complements that of many lay individuals, and Catholic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Health Association.

When the papal nuncio, then Archbishop Pietro Sambi, conveyed my appointment as bishop, he told me that my role entails active involvement within the USCCB. I continue to do this through committee work and attending the November plenary meetings in Baltimore. The June meetings are held in a succession of U.S. cities. This past week we met in Indianapolis. I only mention this so that my readers will know that my "job description" regularly takes me beyond diocesan boundaries. As you would expect, video or teleconferencing does save me from some travel.

Within this conference, each diocese continues to be self-governing. There is no “American Catholic Church.” The conference helps us with resources we don’t have or could not afford by ourselves. At the same time, we gain by the collaboration and communion whereby we can mutually reinforce our discipleship in Christ.