

Use of Title 'Chaplain' in Pastoral Care Ministry

By Bishop Dale J. Melczek
Episcopal Liaison to NACC

For many years, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the NACC have attempted to resolve a dilemma regarding the title "chaplain." In the United States, hiring institutions (health care, prison, and other specialized ministries) will only employ "chaplains" for spiritual care services who are board-certified and hold this professional credential. However, Canon Law (Canons 564-572) restricts the title "chaplain" to ordained priests.

In 1997, several Congregations of the Holy See issued an Instruction, "On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests." This Instruction was given approval by Pope John Paul II and reiterated that it is not permitted for non-ordained faithful to assume the title of "chaplain." We attempted to gain an exception in the United States but were unsuccessful.

The witness and ministry of Catholic women religious and lay faithful, who have met standards approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Commission on Certification and Accreditation and who have been endorsed by their own local bishop, are essential to the Church's outreach to the sick and dying in our hospitals and long-term facilities.

They are also essential representatives of the Church in most institutions today for maintaining a Catholic presence, for assuring adherence to the "Ethical and Religious Guidelines," and for providing direction and comfort to physicians, staff, and family members of the sick and dying.

With a great deal of effort, we have found a way to be faithful to the letter and spirit of Canon Law and the 1997 Instruction and, at the same time, assure the continued ministry of competent, certified religious and lay health care ministers in institutions throughout the country. We will do this by separating out "endorsement for ministry" from the "certification by the profession."

The NACC will continue to submit the NACC standards for periodic review by the Bishops' Commission on Certification and Accreditation and prepare an annual report to the Bishops' Commission. We will continue to request the endorsement from the local Ordinary or his delegate for those who are to be certified or recertified. However, we will request endorsement for "lay ecclesial

health care ministry" rather than for "chaplain."

Should the local Ordinary choose to commission those who are certified or recertified by the NACC, they will likely commission the individual who is a religious sister, brother, or lay person as "lay ecclesial health care minister."

The NACC will issue the certificate as "chaplain" for the sake of "the profession" for the hiring institution.

This distinction enables us to be faithful to Canon Law as we will use the title "lay ecclesial health care minister" in ecclesial settings. It will also meet the requirements of institutions that employ and provide compensation only for those certified as "chaplains."

Most important, the sick and the dying in our hospitals and long-term facilities continue to benefit from the compassionate and competent care of the 3,300 members of the NACC who have met standards approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and who are official representatives endorsed by the local Bishop.

We have found a way to be faithful to Canon Law and the '97 Instruction while we ensure continuation of competent ministry in institutional health care.

Pastoral Care Week Web Site Updated

The web site for Pastoral Care Week has recently been updated for 2004: www.pastoralcare-week.org. The theme for the week, October 24-30, is "Imagining Peace." You will be able to see the poster in its beautiful rainbow colors and order Pastoral Care Week products on line. Other resources are also available on line, including articles, publicity notices and logos.

A copy of the order form is also published in this issue of the Vision.

