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Bishop of Gary

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Your Eminence/Excellency:

For many years, the USCCB and the National Association of Catholic Chaplains have attempted to resolve the dilemma regarding the title "chaplain." In the United States, hiring institutions (health care, prison, and other specialized institutions) will only employ "chaplains" who are board certified and hold this professional credential for spiritual care services. Canon Law (Canons 564-572) restricts the title "chaplain" to ordained priests. The 1997 interdicasterial Instruction, "On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests," approved in *forma specifica* by Pope John Paul II, further specified that it is unlawful for non-ordained faithful to assume the title of "chaplain." Our efforts to obtain a rescript for an exception in the United States have been 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.

To retain this very important ministry and to be faithful to the letter and spirit of Canon Law and the 1997 Instruction, the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (NACC) will separate out "endorsement for ministry" from the "certification by the profession." Currently, the NACC, in the name of the USCCB, does both.

Under this new arrangement, the NACC will:

- submit the NACC standards for periodic review by the USCCB/Commission on Certification and Accreditation and prepare an annual report to the same as is currently done; and
- request the endorsement for "lay ecclesial health care ministry" rather than for "chaplain" by the local Ordinary or his delegate.

The National Association of Catholic Chaplains will issue a certificate for "the profession" as a legally separate 501(C)3 no longer with the reading "and by the authority of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops." As is theologically and canonically appropriate, the bishop of the local Church may choose to commission as "lay ecclesial health care ministers" those who have obtained the professional certification to do those things which the hiring institutions entrust to certified chaplains regardless of religion or ecclesiastical standing within a given faith.

This accommodation was discussed at the September 2003 USCCB Administrative Board meeting and at the March 13, 2004 meeting of the NACC Board of Directors and Committee on Certification. This solution enables the Church to continue to benefit from the oversight and ministry of the 3,300 members of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains (87 percent of whom are women religious or lay faithful) and it also allows those members to retain employment in and remuneration from the hiring institution. The Church is truly blessed with the compassionate and competent ministry which they extend to our faithful who are sick and dying in hospitals and long-term facilities, and also to those who are incarcerated.

Fraternally yours in the Lord Jesus,

Most Reverend Dale J. Melczek
Bishop of Gary
Episcopal Liaison to the NACC