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## Catholic Church Accounting Committee Urges Tighter Internal Finance Controls for Nation's 19,000 Parishes

WASHINGTON (January 18, 2007)— The Accounting Practices Committee, a group of lay experts who advise the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), has called for tighter internal controls over finances in the nation's more than 19,000 parishes.

The Committee made several recommendations for parishes, which deal primarily in cash from the collection plate, and urged "effective oversight by the bishop for compliance."

It specifically recommended:

- An annual letter from the parish to the bishop containing
  - The names and professional titles of the parish finance council members,
  - Dates when the council met in the preceding fiscal year and since the end of the fiscal year,
  - Date(s) when the approved (i.e. by the parish finance council) parish financial statements/budgets were made available to the parishioners during the preceding fiscal year and since the end of the fiscal year. A copy of the published financial statements/budgets should be provided to the bishop, it added.
- A statement signed by the parish priest and the finance council members that they have met, developed, and discussed the financial statements and budget of the parish.
- Thorough diocesan training for parish finance council members relative to their roles and responsibilities.
- Establishment of diocesan policies to cover conflicts of interest, protection of whistleblowers, and a fraud policy which would include prosecution of all fraud cases in the diocese.
- Completion of an annual internal control questionnaire by each parish with proper review and follow-up made by qualified diocesan personnel.

In longer-term recommendations, the committee urged

- Development of a parish best practices manual, similar to the Diocesan Financial Issues document, which has been developed for dioceses.
- Integration of financial training into seminarian programs so students will be better prepared to handle parish financial matters.

Bishop Dennis M. Schnurr of Duluth, Minnesota, Treasurer of the USCCB, said that "the recommendations are reasonable and helpful" and said he would implement them in his own diocese.

However, he did not readily concur with training seminarians in parish finances.

"Seminary days are jam packed enough, and I am not certain that finances should be added to the schedule," he said. "Finance is an area of parish ministry that is wide open for participation of the laity. Members of the laity who have expertise and experience with administration and finance should be invited and encouraged to consider a stewardship of their talents. The message to our seminarians should be that, as parish leaders, they are to recognize, call forth, and coordinate the talents that God has entrusted to a particular parish community."

The committee said that the recommendations are intended to improve existing diocesan policies on financial governance at the parish level. Dioceses already have very good policies in place and the recommendations should be viewed as a call for re-doubling of efforts, it said.

The committee added that the recommendations must be complementary to the work being done by the Diocesan Fiscal Management Conference on the internal audits of parishes, under the auspices of the USCCB Ad Hoc Committee on Diocesan Audits.

The Accounting Practices Committee, which met January 11-12, is chaired by William G. Weldon, a certified public accountant and chief financial officer of the Diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina. Committee members include nine CPAs with a diocesan affiliation, four representing LCWR and CMSM, and four CPA advisers from large public accounting firms. The USCCB Chief Financial Officer serves as staff to the Committee.