

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Meetings — A New Form of Penance

My wonderful secretary, Anna Brady, has a thing on scissors and paste and clippings. With great regularity she puts some selected



gems of wisdom and humor on my desk. I am grateful for her apostolate of brightening the days of her bishop. A recent clipping from the Beacon, the weekly newspaper of the Diocese of Paterson, struck a responsive chord in my heart. She had it right when she remarked in an attached note: "I thought you might have more than a passing interest in this article."

On May 29, Father John Catoir of Paterson wrote an article titled "The Penance of Meetings." Anna had seen me passing her desk each day and saying: "I'll see you later, Anna — maybe in two or three hours. I'm on my way to a meeting." She sensed my empathy for the reflections of the author.

Anyone, even with minimal involvement in the life of the Church of the 70's, has to know that this is the age of meetings. The consultative process encouraged by Vatican II has promoted dialogue, committees, subcommittees, ad hoc committees, standing committees and committees to form committees. Which all adds up to meetings after meetings and exhaustion and frustration. I understand Father Catoir's anxiety as he noted: "In the Middle Ages, Christians used to wear hair shirts. Today they attend meetings."

With the same anxiety, I have said more than once: "If Heaven is defined as a perpetual meeting, I will be tempted to opt for the opposite direction." I find a growing

'antimeeting' syndrome rapidly developing within me. I am working to control it because I believe that the consultative process has much merit, despite the pain that comes with it. It is a good promoted by Vatican II to incarnate the image of the Church as the People of God. But we have to learn how to use our newfound freedom constructively. For ages, we kept God's people passive and silent. Now we are faced with a flock anxious to make up for lost time by multiplying opportunities for dialogue and forums for ventilation.

I confess that I must develop patience and tolerance for the pain of meetings. I find myself laughing too heartily at antimeeting jokes and remarks. I have applauded these recent comments of lecturers who are obviously antimeeting people:

1. "A camel is a horse formed by a Committee."
2. "Any meeting that lasts more than an hour is a worthless expenditure of human energy."
3. "I found myself at one time in my life as College Professor serving on fourteen School Committees. I resigned from all of them to be liberated to teach — which, after all, was what I was hired to do."
4. "The good Lord gave us two ears and only one mouth. But we haven't got the message."

Come to think of it, I have happy memories of two committees on which I served. But only because they died an early death. I remember one in Elmira in the first year of my priesthood. I was asked to serve

on a Citizen's Committee. The first meeting became the final one when all the membership voted 'No' to two basic questions: Do we serve any purpose? and Do we have any authority?

The second committee was formed by the Mayor of Geneva to study the local parks. An editorial in the local paper dissolved the committee who felt insulted by the article headlined: "Mayor Scrapes Bottom of Barrel to Form Committee." The theme was — "They are nice people — but what do they know about parks." I am eternally grateful for that editorial.

I like what Father Catoir had to say about the ingredient of prayer that could save our meetings and make them worthwhile. I have always urged Parish Councils to allow for a good portion of time given at each session for prayerful reflection. It proves to be the most productive part of the meeting, and it sets the climate for the rest of the agenda.

Perhaps, Father Catoir observes, it's time to take inventory of our meetings. Here is a good list for such an inventory. I pray that Priests' Councils, Sisters' Councils, Parish Councils and the Diocesan Pastoral Council will take heed:

1. "What are we trying to accomplish when we meet?"
2. "What relationship does Jesus have to this meeting?"
3. "Is He central to our discussions?"
4. "Have we paused to find out what He would want?"
5. "Is our old business and new business related to His presence?"

vatican news

Vatican Issues Guidelines on Local Ecumenism

Vatican City [RNS] — The Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity has issued a document providing guidelines for Catholic participation in ecumenical activity on the local and regional levels.

In an introduction, Cardinal John Willebrands, president of the secretariat, explains that the document "sets out orientations which do not have the force of law but which have the weight of the experience and insights of the Secretariat."

Over all, the document, "Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels," describes ecumenical activity in positive terms and encourages Catholic involvement in it.

But there is a strong emphasis on keeping Catholic ecumenical activity under the control of bishops and in harmony with principles laid down by the Holy See.

"Ecumenism is an integral part of the renewal of the Church, and its promotion should be the constant concern of the local church," says the document, which uses "local church" to mean parishes, dioceses and bishops' conferences on the national and regional levels.

"With the awareness that in a given place it is the vehicle of the presence and action of the Catholic Church, which is fundamentally one," the document states, "the local church will be ready to take care that its free initiatives do not go beyond its competence and are always

undertaken within the limits of the doctrine and the discipline of the whole Catholic Church, particularly as this touches the sacraments."

In his introduction, Cardinal Willebrands explained that the document was prepared through a long process, that began with the writing of a first draft by Secretariat staff and consultants in June 1971.

Later revisions, he said, made use of two studies carried out under the auspices of the Joint Working Group of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

A final version, Cardinal Willebrands said, was approved at the Secretariat's 1973 plenary meeting "subject to several improvements both in content and form."

"These changes as well as some suggestions from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were incorporated into the final text," he said.

The resulting document, Cardinal Willebrands said, was not a set of directives or prescriptions endowed with authority in the juridical sense of the word. Rather it is a document that gives the kind of information which can help bishops in a certain place decide about the form to be given to the local ecumenical collaboration.

After sections on "the ecumenical task" and "the Catholic understanding of local church and its relation to the ecumenical movement," the

document describes the various forms of local ecumenical activity.

The most extended treatment is given to councils of churches and issues related to Catholic participation in them.

Recommendations of the Secretariat are summarized in a 12-point section on "Pastoral and Practical Reflections for Local Ecumenical Action." Among the "reflections" are the following:

* "Full account ought to be given to local needs and problems in organizing ecumenical action; models from other places cannot simply be imitated.

* "Ultimately, it is always the responsibility of the regional or national episcopal conference to decide on the acceptability and the appropriateness of all forms of local ecumenical action. They should do this in cooperation with the appropriate organ of the Holy See, viz. the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

* "What really matters is not the creation of new structures but the collaboration of Christians in prayer, reflection and action, based on common baptism and on a faith which on many essential points is also common.

* "Among the many forms of ecumenical cooperation councils of churches and Christian councils are not the only form but they are certainly one of the more important. Since regional, national and local councils are widespread in many parts of the world and do play an important role in ecumenical relations, the

responsible contacts which the Catholic Church is having with them are welcome.

"It is normal that councils should want to discuss and reflect upon the doctrinal bases of the practical projects they undertake. But in such cases it is important to clarify the doctrinal principles involved. It should always be clear that when Catholics take part in a council, they can enter into such discussions only in conformity with the teaching of their Church.

* "The first and immediate responsibility for a decision to join a council rests with the highest ecclesiastical authority in the area served by the council. In practical terms this responsibility

is not transferable. With regard to national councils the authority would generally be the episcopal conference (where there is only one diocese for the nation, it would be the Ordinary of the diocese). In reaching a decision, there must necessarily be communication with the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity."

A concluding section discusses ecumenical action through "informal groups of a spontaneous kind" such as prayer groups or groups directed toward various action goals. Groups of this kind "under Catholic responsibility," the document says, should function in full communion with the local bishop.

Vatican Aide, E. Germans Talk

Rome [RNS] — Archbishop Agostino Casaroli, Pope Paul's top foreign affairs aide, said here that his talks with high-ranking officials of Communist East Germany had been "useful and fruitful."

The Vatican prelate, who is secretary of the Council for the Public Affairs of the Church, returned here June 15 following a week of talks in East Berlin with Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer, Hans Seigewasser, the secretary for church affairs, and other government authorities.

An East Berlin broadcast said that before leaving, Archbishop Casaroli had "conveyed Pope Paul's satisfaction that 150

Catholics from the German Democratic Republic (DDR), would be able to participate in a Holy Year pilgrimage to Rome at the end of June."

The broadcast said it would be the first time that DDR authorities have permitted a pilgrimage of East German Catholics to Rome.

A West German radio report said that the Vatican diplomat had laid a wreath at the memorial to those who died in the Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald, and also visited the house of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the 19th Century German poet, dramatist and philosopher.