

1980 — A Year of Religious Challenge

By Religious News Service

Mixing of religion and politics was a major development in the U.S. during 1980, but clashes between churches and governments marked the year in other countries as well.

Triumphs and tragedies of the past 12 months in the world of religion included the elevation of the first woman bishop in a major denomination, and the assassination of a Roman Catholic archbishop in Latin America.

The peripatetic Pope John Paul II visited several parts of the world during the year, which was also marked by a world synod of bishops at the Vatican and a papal encyclical. Reconstruction of Zimbabwe and Cambodia occupied the churches, as did resettlement of refugees from Cuba and Haiti in the U.S.

Among the issues that drew the attention of religious groups in the U.S. during the year were draft registration, prayer in public schools, government policies on the family, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.

The presidential election triumph of Ronald Reagan and the conservative Republican rout of liberal Democrats in Senate races represented a victory for religio-political groups like Moral Majority and Christian Voice, which had made lists of what they considered moral issues and targeted special efforts against certain incumbents.

In addition to the activities of fundamentalist Protestants like the Rev. Jerry Falwell in the political arena, Roman Catholics were also involved in election controversies. The pope's directive barring priests from holding high political office led to the political retirement of Rep. Robert F. Drinan (D-Mass.), a Jesuit. Cardinal Humberto Medeiros of Boston drew criticism when he urged Catholics to vote against candidates in the Massachusetts primary, who favored abortion.

A denomination that faces a lively convention in 1981 is the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. President Jacob A.O. Preus announced that he would not run for reelection, as did Dr. Edwin C. Weber, first vice president. Dr. Preus, who had headed the denomination during its schism in the mid-1970s, drew

criticism for sending a letter to Missouri Synod congregations raising questions about the orthodoxy of Dr. Walter A. Meier Jr., third vice president of the denomination and a likely candidate for its presidency.

In early December, a new denomination called Zion's First International Church was formed by a group of dissidents who left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon). Co-founders of the new body were Bryon Merchant, who was excommunicated by the Mormons in 1977 for criticizing their policy at that time of not admitting blacks to the priesthood, and Lee Ann Walker, a supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, which the Mormon Church opposes.

The episcopacy drew the attention of two Protestant churches this year. The Lutheran Church in America voted to use the title of "bishop" for its top administrative officers — a change that had previously been made by the American Lutheran Church. The United Methodist Church made history by electing the Rev. Marjorie Matthews, a district superintendent in Michigan, as the first woman bishop in a main-line denomination.

Another issue involving women in churches has been the use of male-only references in liturgy. The U.S. Catholic bishops voted in November to drop such references from texts of the Mass, and a unit of the National Council of Churches (NCC) launched a project to prepare "non-sexist" English texts of Bible passages for use in lectionary readings.

Native Americans rejoiced in June when Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk Indian who lived in Upstate New York in the 17th century, was beatified by Pope John Paul II. It was a busy year for the pontiff, including trips to six African countries in May, four days in France in late May, a 12-day visit to Brazil in July, and five days in West Germany in November.

Shortly after his return from the German trip, the pope issued his second encyclical. Entitled, "On the Mercy of God," it declared that justice must be coupled with mercy if the world's socio-economic problems are to be solved.

The encyclical was promulgated a few days after the Vatican's Congregation for Doctrine reaffirmed the tradition of infant baptism. Another Vatican document, issued in June, declared that although patients faced with imminent death may refuse medical treatment, "mercy killing" is ruled out.

Meeting during October to discuss the role of the Christian family in the modern world, 216 Catholic bishops from five continents issued a 2,700-word message that reaffirmed the church's opposition to marriage after divorce, artificial contraception, and abortion.

In the U.S., three regional meetings of the White House Conference on Families drew controversy as special-interest groups tried to force their agendas from a variety of religious and social perspectives. Recommendations of the conference called for such things as personnel policies allowing flexible job schedules, elimination of the "marriage tax" penalty on two-income families, and tax policies to support care for aging and handicapped persons.

Controversial rulings in the area of religion handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1980 included decisions permitting the observance of religious holidays in public schools and barring government agencies from requiring public schools to post copies of the Ten Commandments in classrooms. The high court had drawn the wrath of conservatives in the past for its rulings on abortion, but this time it was criticized by liberals when it ruled in June that the Hyde Amendment, which forbids the use of federal funds for abortions except to save the life of the mother, is constitutional.

In helping to resettle Cuban refugees, U.S. religious groups faced resentment from some communities who felt the country was admitting too many refugees. Despite this, the churches generally favored a liberalizing of immigration laws to permit more Haitian refugees to enter the country. Refugees from Indochina continued to come to the U.S., as religious groups worked to rehabilitate the strife-torn country of Cambodia.

As the year drew to a close, it appeared that Northern Ireland was about to face yet

another outbreak of sectarian violence. Tensions mounted as seven Irish Republican prisoners at the Maze prison outside Belfast continued a "strike to the death" into a second month, demanding that the British government grant special political status to prisoners guilty of terrorist offenses.

Prisoners in the Soviet Union got new attention as the East-West talks on implementing the 1975 Helsinki Accords got underway in Madrid in November. For the first time in its 32-year history, the World Council of Churches made public a message of concern regarding the trials of dissident Russian Orthodox activists in the Soviet Union. Russian Orthodox leader Metropolitan Juvenaly, to whom the message had been addressed, said that "leniency" had been shown to dissidents who had confessed their "anti-Soviet" activities.

Poland's Roman Catholic bishops overcame some initial hesitancy and sided with that country's trade-unions as they won major concessions from the communist government. In El Salvador, Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero and four Catholic women missionaries from the U.S. were murdered by terrorists as violence between extremists on the right and left continued in that country.

Israel's formal

proclamation of the reunited city of Jerusalem as its capital was denounced by the United Nations and by several countries that proceeded to move their embassies out of that city. In the U.S., the National Council of Churches was denounced by Jewish groups for recommending that Israel negotiate a peace settlement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Anti-Semitism appeared to be on the rise both in the U.S. — symbolized by the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and vandalism of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries — and around the world, as shown in the October bombing at a Paris synagogue that killed four people. Romanian Orthodox Archbishop Valerian Trifa gave up his U.S. citizenship in August as the Justice Department stepped up procedures that could lead to his deportation on charges that he had been a leader of the anti-Semitic Iron Guard in Romania during World War II.

At a meeting celebrating the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, a major Lutheran document, Catholic and Lutheran theologians completed work on three ecumenical statements. The pope met with Lutheran leaders during his visit to Germany and acknowledged that the Roman Catholic Church had been partly to

blame for the controversy that led to the Protestant Reformation.

The Vatican also tackled intra-Catholic problems involving theology during 1980. A special synod of Holland's hierarchy met in January and hammered out a 22-page document designed to end a long dispute in that country's Catholic Church over issues ranging from ecumenism to birth control. The Rev. Hans Kueng lost his right to teach as an official Catholic theologian when the Vatican censured him for unorthodoxy in late 1979. But he was allowed to remain as a professor at Tuebingen University in West Germany.

In August, the Vatican announced that some married Episcopal priests could be admitted into Roman Catholic priesthood. The announcement particularly affected dissidents who left the Episcopal Church in protest against its decision to ordain women priests. Those who joined the Roman Catholic Church were required to profess submission to papal authority and Catholic doctrine. Episcopal Church leaders criticized the action as unhelpful to improving Episcopal-Catholic relations.

Dorothy Day, the socialist who was a founder of the Catholic Worker movement in 1933, died in New York at the age of 83.

Was Ousted from Center, Father Marx Now Says

Collegetown, Minn. (RNS) — Breaking his silence, Father Paul Marx, OSB, now says he regards the year's sabbatical voted him as president of the Human Life Center at St. John's University as an "ouster."

The anti-abortion crusader, 60, said that he may leave the Benedictine Order "if I cannot fight the anti-lifers as a Benedictine."

But he emphasized he would never leave the priesthood.

Father Marx was given the involuntary sabbatical Nov. 8 by the board of the center, which he founded in 1973 and made internationally famous

through his speaking and writing. The board cited concern over Father Marx' health and his involvement in two serious automobile accidents.

"My health is perfect," Father Marx insisted, reporting he had been given "clearance" by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., where he was examined in October.

Noting that two associates at the center were dismissed shortly after he was given his sabbatical, Father Marx remarked that they "got the same disease I did." The associates are Daniel Lyons, a former Jesuit priest who is the center's director of

development and editor of its newspaper, and Andrew Scholberg.

Lyons and Scholberg have founded a new life and family center in Avon, Minn., about five miles from Collegetown.

Father Marx said he did not know whether he would return to the presidency after the year sabbatical.

Meanwhile, the center board in a letter to "friends of the Human Life Center," state, "Although the Board of Directors has relieved Father Paul Marx of any administrative duties while he is on sabbatical, we have not severed his relationship with the Human Life Center."

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