

Pope Issues Document from Synod on Family

By Eleni Dimmler

Vatican City (RNS) — In a comprehensive document responding to recommendations from the world's bishops, Pope John Paul II has emphatically reconfirmed the Church's traditional stands on such controversial issues as birth control, remarriage after divorce and abortion.

It also represents the strongest plea for equal rights yet voiced by the pontiff, although he cautions against giving more prestige to work outside the home than to that done within.

While recognizing the "serious problem of

population growth," the pope said the Church was "called upon to manifest anew to everyone, with clear and stronger conviction, her will to promote human life by every means and to defend it against all attacks, in whatever condition or state of development it is found."

Archbishop Josef Tomko, secretary general of the bishops' synod, who spent more than a year working on the document, outlined its main points and answered journalists' questions at the conference.

"The (apostolic) exhortation realistically recognizes the positive aspects of certain social phenomena

related to the family, but it also recognizes the complex situations in which certain couples and families find themselves today," he said. "The document has a word for the families in each of these situations."

On the controversial question of birth control, Archbishop Tomko said, "the Church stands decidedly on the side of life." He added, however, that the new document also encouraged further consideration of the problem.

"The real question of (contraceptive) methods will never be fully understood unless the more basic questions of sexuality is understood," Archbishop Tomko said in response to a reporter's question.

The 175-page text is the formal restatement of the Church's position on issues discussed 13 months ago by a synod of 200 bishops and it covers all facets of modern family life.

Entitled "Familiaris consortio," the apostolic exhortation is addressed by John Paul "to the episcopate, to the clergy and to the faithful of the whole Catholic Church."

In condemning today's widespread "anti-life mentality," the document reiterates the Church ban on abortion and all artificial means of contraception, while upholding natural family planning as the only acceptable form of birth control.

"The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of the person, that is the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self control," the document states.

It encourages further research into these methods and calls for "more decisive

and more systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied."

The text is the pope's response to 43 recommendations made by the bishops at last year's synod of the "Christian Family in the Modern World."

Bishops from a number of countries had asked for a re-examination of the doctrine on contraception.

American delegates cited studies showing that 75 percent of U.S. Catholic women of childbearing age use some form of artificial birth control and that only 29 percent of the nation's priests consider contraception immoral.

Also turned down was the suggestion of some priests that people divorced and remarried outside of the Church be allowed to take communion.

The pontiff expressed sympathy for husbands or wives abandoned by their spouses, but added, "The Church reaffirms her practice ... of not admitting to the eucharistic communion divorced persons who have remarried."

Since remarriage after divorce "is an evil that, like others, is affecting more and more Catholics ... the problem should be faced with resolution and without delay," he insisted.

He also condemned as "unacceptable" "trial marriages, defacto free unions," and civil marriages.

Church marriages are recommended even for those baptized Christian couples who lack a mature commitment to the faith as long as they do not deny Catholic doctrine. The pontiff warned against refusing couples a Church marriage and thus running the risk of "making unfounded and

discriminatory judgments," and of "causing doubts about the validity of marriages already celebrated."

Other topics treated in the text included preparation for marriage, a "clear and delicate sex education" for children as well as "education for chastity."

Although the document is devoted primarily to the family and its role in the Church and in society, it also restates the traditional teaching that virginity and celibacy constitute "the supreme form of self-giving that constitutes the very

meaning of human sexuality."

In the section on the "rights and role of women," the pontiff says that they must be guaranteed the right to work outside the home, but said that the structure of society must not "compel" them to do so.

Furthermore, the mentality which honors women more for their work outside the home than for their work within the family must be overcome, the document says.

Sister Audrey Synnott



Viewpoint: Sisters Reflect

Holiness Today: What Is It?

Holiness that has made me want to be holy has had little to do with perfection and a great deal to do with compassion. Toward the end of "Markings," Hammarikjold writes, "One result of God's marriage to the soul is a union with other people which does not draw back before the ultimate surrender of the self." When Jesus wept over Jerusalem it was because he understood, had compassion for, the people's inability to recognize who he was. Jesus stayed helpless with us, leaving to his Father the moment of illumination, a moment that was slow to come even to the 12 men who knew him best. Their confusion was evident at the Last Supper, to say nothing of the fear that paralyzed them after the Resurrection.

Every person whose holiness has touched my life has surprised me by his or her open acceptance of all aspects of my personality. My weaknesses neither surprised them nor drove them away. I suspect that such unqualified receptivity came from the person's ease with the untidy areas of his or her own humanity. I once asked someone, whose even temper I admired, how he controlled his anger. "Well-timed swearing," he answered. Humor, especially laughter at oneself, has its part in holiness.

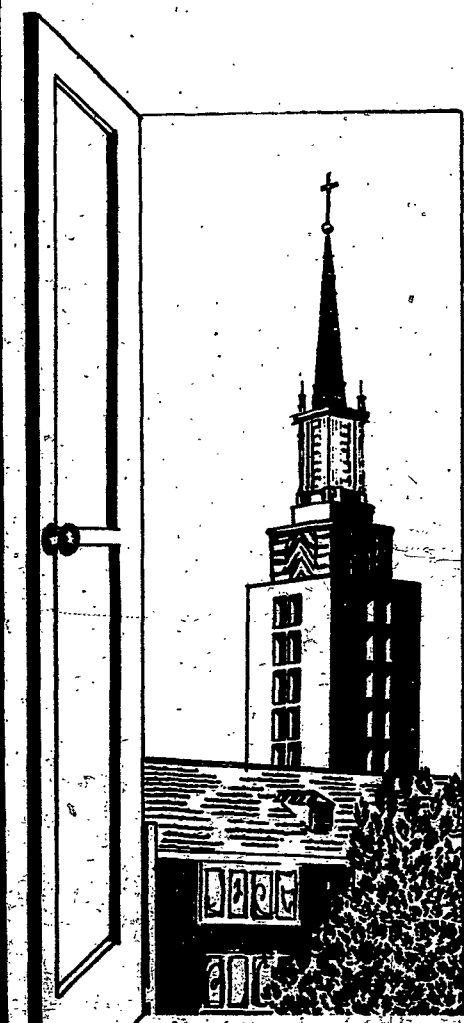
Because God loved us first, we are already a holy people. The challenge is to live out that holiness in our daily lives. Pain and confusion assail us from every side and can drastically influence our decisions. I have been fortunate to know several people whose suffering never turned their focus entirely in on themselves. They discovered opportunities for loving and for being loved in situations from which I would have tried my best to withdraw.

Holiness requires a daily choice to become more loving, to risk sharing ourselves increasingly with others, and to discover

(With today's column, "Viewpoint: Sisters Reflect" begins a series of 30 articles written by Sisters working in the Rochester diocese. The first five articles will be reflections on the meaning of holiness in the modern world.)

opportunities for continuing growth in all the events of our lives, however small and routine our presence in a place may appear to be. For myself, I am still at the start of the road, slowly learning that God loves me as I am, deeply thankful that there are others with me who know his voice. I am sure we do not become holy by ourselves. In our need, we uncover the holiness in each other as we journey home.

Sister Audrey Synnott, RSM, is an administrative assistant for the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.



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