

# Popular Churches: A Papal Warning

Following is a letter from Pope John Paul II to the bishops of Nicaragua on the subject of "popular churches," a phenomenon described as "groups born of ideological connotations, political radicalization, class struggle, acceptance of violence, etc.," by Origins, the documentary service of the U.S. bishops.

In obedience to the mysterious call that made him successor of Peter, the pope pledges with a good will what he holds and even himself as well, for the good of all. While he does so, he does not forget his duties toward those who carry out their ministry as pastors in the midst of no small difficulties in particular churches throughout the world.



A special bond ties them. It is special by reason of its roots in the Gospel, for Jesus conferred the first place, among the Twelve on Peter and, at a solemn moment in his life, willed to entrust to him the mission of confirming his brothers in the faith and in apostolic service to himself. It is special by reason of its theological nature: The Second Vatican Council deepened the ancient doctrine of episcopal collegiality and, with a wealth of concepts and expressions, emphasized that the episcopal college "insofar as it is composed of many members, is the expression of the multifariousness and universality of the people of God; and of the unity of the flock of Christ insofar as it is assembled under one head."

I wish you to know that I am very near you because of this bond, the profoundly affective dimension of which is in no way diminished by its dogmatic aspect and in view of the peculiar circumstances in which you are called to exercise your episcopal ministry. I am near inasmuch as "I have never stopped thanking God for you and recommending you in my prayers." I am near through the attention and interest with which I constantly inform myself of your pastoral activities. I am near through my spiritual support for your labor, which is as devout as it is demanding and delicate, and is for the sake of the human, personal and collective advancement of your peoples. I am near you, finally in my fraternal concern for your task as pastors and teachers in the churches entrusted to you.

Moreover, today's feast of the apostles Peter and Paul arouses the sentiment of collegiality in us, and thus gives me the opportunity to write to you "for I long to see you and share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you."

I expect that you have already found the foregoing considerations the first and fundamental expression of

encouragement and stimulus that I would convey to you. A bishop is never alone, since he finds himself in living, dynamic communion with the pope and with his brother bishops throughout the world. You are not alone: You are borne up by the spiritual presence of this elder brothers of yours, and you are surrounded by the affective and effective communion of thousands of brothers.

But I ask you to think about another more limited, yet no less important dimension of communion: communion among yourselves as members of the beloved bishops' conference of Nicaragua.

This communion arises from participation in the fullness of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. It is not merely external, it is not made up of conventions and protocol. It is a sacramental communion, and it ought to be put into practice as such.

I confess that I can have no greater joy than that of knowing that this essential unity in Christ and in the church prevails among you, above everything that might divide you. This unity is the more exigent and necessary the more that your preaching and the effectiveness of your apostolate depend on it, on the one hand, as does, on the other hand, the communion which, in the midst of well-known difficulties, it is your mission to construct among your faithful.

Well then, this unity of the faithful appears to our eyes as perhaps the most precious gift — because it is the most frail and threatened gift — of this church in Nicaragua which is yours and ours.

The Second Vatican Council declared of the universal church that it is the sign and instrument of unity to be constructed the world and mankind. What it declared may be applied in due measure to ecclesial communities at all levels.

The church in Nicaragua therefore has the great responsibility of being a sacrament, that is to say, the sign and instrument of unity in the country. For this it itself has to be, as a community, a true unity and image of unity.

It must be remembered in this regard that the more there exist stirrings of discord, of disunion, of breaks and separations in an environment, the more the church ought to be an area of unity and cohesion. But it will be so only if it gives evidence of being of one heart and one mind thanks to the supernatural principles of unity, which ought to be energetic and determining enough to overcome the forces of division to which the church itself is subjected.

Since you are visible signs of unity by divine calling, I pray that you may be able to ensure that the Christians of your country will not be divided because of opposed ideologies, for "one Lord, one faith, one

baptism, one God and Father" congregated them, as they themselves are accustomed to sing, taking inspiration from the words of the apostle Paul. And may it be that, being united by the same faith and rejecting everything contrary to or destructive of that unity, your Christians may find themselves united in the shared gospel ideals of justice, peace, solidarity, communion and participation, without being irremediably divided by contingent choices arising from systems, movements, parties or organizations.

May your responsibility grow, from this point of view, because the bishop must in his turn concretely weave the unity of the faithful.

You know the great importance of the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, because of the authority of him who wrote — he was a disciple of the beloved apostle — and because of their antiquity, which makes them a testimony of a vital moment in the church's history, and finally because of the richness of their doctrinal content. Well, in very strong terms, certainly in response to the first difficulties appearing in this field, Ignatius shows in those letters that there is not and cannot be valid and durable communion in the church save in union of sentiment and action with the bishop. The image of the strings of a lyre is a beautiful one. It suggests a more profound reality. The bishop is like Jesus Christ: He is made present in the midst of his church as the living and dynamic principle of unity. This unity does not exist without him or it is falsified and so is inconsistent and ephemeral.

Hence the absurd and perilous character of imagining oneself as being to one side of — not to say against — the church built up about the bishop, as being another church conceived as "charismatic" and not institutional, "new" and not traditional, alternative and, as is envisaged lately, a "popular" or "people's" church.

I am not unaware that an acceptable meaning may be attributed to such a nomenclature — regarded as synonymous with the "church born of the people." By this would be meant that the church arises when a community of persons — especially persons disposed by their littleness, humility and poverty to the Christian venture — opens to the good news of Jesus Christ and begins to live it in a community of faith, love, hope, prayer and celebration of and participation in the Christian mysteries, especially in the eucharist.

But you know that the concluding document of the Third General Assembly of Latin American Bishops at Puebla declared this name of "iglesia popular" to be "scarcely a happy one." It did so after mature study and reflection among the bishops of the entire continent, because it was conscious that this name in general covers another reality.

(To be concluded next week.)

## David O'Brien to Be Featured Speaker

Dr. David O'Brien, noted American Catholic historian and professor at Holy Cross College, will be featured at "On Earth as It Is in Heaven..." billed as an

## Serenity Weekend Scheduled

A Serenity Weekend Retreat for members of Alcoholics Anonymous has been slated Oct. 1-3 at the Cenacle Renewal Center. Anonymity is assured for persons wishing to attend.

Leading the program are Sister Katherine, RC, and Father Bill. The team led the highly successful weekend at the Cenacle last year. Sister Katherine is known for her work with the movement across the Northeast.

Information and reservations are obtained by contacting the Cenacle Ministry Office, 693 East Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14607; (716) 271-8755.

evening to consider the Church's mission to seek justice and quest for peace.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Father Charles Mulligan, diocesan social ministries director, also will participate in the program, beginning at 7:30 p.m., Friday, Oct. 1, at St. John Fisher College's Basil Hall.

Dr. O'Brien began his association with Catholic social action at Rochester's St. Joseph House of Hospitality while he was a graduate student at the University of Rochester. He has been active in the New England Catholic Peace Fellowship and is now faculty moderator of Pax Christi at Holy Cross.

He has written several books and many articles and is a regular contributor to Commonwealth magazine.

Admission will be \$2 or \$10 for groups of five or more. Further information is available from Jim Lund, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, telephone (716) 328-3210.

## CDA Unit Takes National Honor

The Rochester Catholic Daughters of the Americas, Court 1139, recently won an award of merit for its newsletter at the group's national convention in Chicago.

It marks the second award for the newsletter. The local court, of which Lillian Buttaggi is regent, also took state honors last April.

The group is now in a membership drive, according to Barbara L. Hennessey, state regent. The motto of the

order is "Unity and Charity," and the group participates in local and national charities, particularly in the fields of education and scholarship.

The CDA is the world's largest organization of Catholic women. Further information on the group is available by calling (716) 482-5991.

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