

RECONCILIATION

Stressed by Synod of Bishops Among Persons and among Nations

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh
NC News Service

Vatican City -- Three actions of Pope John Paul II during October -- the mailing of letters to world leaders, the canonization of St. Leopold Mandic and the leading of the Stations of the Cross in front of St. Peter's Basilica -- symbolized the sixth world Synod of Bishops.

The synod, which closed Oct. 29, stressed reconciliation among nations, a renewal of the sacrament of penance, and the need for persons to seek penance and conversion in the own lives.

The synod closed after a month of prayer and discussion on reconciliation and penance in the mission of the church. In the Oct. 29 final session, synod delegates heard from the pope, who had attended almost all synod sessions, but had said nothing after opening the synod with a speech Sept. 29.

"He just listened. He didn't even take notes" Cardinal Joseph Cordeiro of Karachi, Pakistan, said, evoking laughter and applause from delegates as he thanked the pope for his presence.

Cardinal Cordeiro, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Cardinal Timothy Manning of Los Angeles took turns presiding over the synod sessions.

In his closing address, the pope noted that synod delegates "expressed a vivid preoccupation for world peace" and said that he, in keeping with this concern, had sent personal messages to U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Yuri Andropov urging disarmament.

"The international situation is very tense and I am also very troubled," he said.

"The church must commit herself to use every means at her disposal to ward off the dangers which menace world security," he added.

"In these days I sent a pressing appeal to the presidents of the United States and of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, asking them not to turn away from negotiation as the only way" to reduce the arms race, "which keeps the whole of contemporary humanity in apprehension," the pope said.

The pope's action was in keeping with a promise made by the entire synod, Oct. 27, in its message to the world.

"The church will work to heal the divisions and tensions of the world," the synod delegates said in the message which had been drafted by a five-member elected committee which included Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis.

"We shall be tireless in the search for peace and disarmament and the reduction of tensions particularly between East and West. We have no political power but we can voice to the leaders of states the anxious longing of their people for a safer, more peaceful world," the message said.

The canonization of Father Leopold Mandic, a Capuchin monk, and many of the synod's 63 propositions emphasized another synod theme: the need for renewal of the sacrament of penance.

The pope had indicated that he decided to canonize St. Leopold Mandic on Oct. 16, in the midst of the synod, to highlight the role of the confessor in church life. The new saint was primarily known as a confessor and people used to wait in line for hours at his confessional.

At the canonization, where 45 cardinals and 160 bishops were among those in attendance, the pope said that the new saint's greatness was in his gift of hearing confessions.

A Vatican summary of the 63 propositions, which Archbishop Roach said were approved overwhelmingly by the synod, also acknowledged the importance of confession. The summary said that 16 propositions concern doctrinal themes and give "new impulse to a catechetical action." A further 13 are "dedicated to a detailed examination of the theme of the dedication of the sacrament," added the summary.

The full texts of the propositions were submitted to the pope and not made public. They are expected to form the basis of a later document, which the pope said should "reflect the common thought of the synodal assembly and of the pope who presides over it ex officio."

That the final 63 documents found overwhelming approval testified to the action of reconciliation within the synod itself, where varying views had been expressed on several issues, most notably, on the use of general absolution without prior individual confession of sins.

Strong arguments for more acceptance of general absolution, without prior or even any confession of sins, came from bishops of Third World countries who said that in many Third World countries one priest may serve thousands of people separated by hundreds of miles.

The four elected delegates from the United States joined the debate with a joint statement Oct. 4 in which they asked, "How can the obligation of subsequent confession of moral sins that already have been forgiven through general absolution be shown to have grounds in human needs and rights as well as in the structure of the sacrament of penance itself?"

They also asked: "Are danger of death and grave necessity the only times when the church wishes to authorize or may authorize use of general absolution in the church?"

Signing the joint statement were Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, Archbishop Roach, Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio and Auxiliary Bishop Austin Vaughan of New York.

Cardinal Ratzinger addressed their questions Oct. 6 and said that a person must confess sins individually because "conversion cannot be only an interior matter" and said that priests cannot grant general absolution simply because of a large number of penitents.

Afterward, Cardinal Bernardin said at a press conference that although the statement carried "special weight" in light of Cardinal Ratzinger's position as head of the doctrinal congregation, it did not end discussion.

At the same press conference, Archbishop Roach said that while Cardinal Ratzinger "pulled together a history of the rule and its practice," he did not address the pastoral questions raised in Third World areas such as Africa, where individual confession often is an impossibility for long periods of time because of the lack of priests and the long distances they have to travel.

The pope seemed to indicate in his closing speech, however, that the resolution of this debate and other doctrinal issues is now out of the synod's hands.

"The brief time at our disposal does not allow us to dwell any longer on the various questions which were dealt with in the synodal assembly" regarding the doctrinal and practical issues raised about penance and reconciliation, the pope said. "The document in which, with God's help, all the richness of the elements which emerged during the synod will be gathered together, will see that these concepts are adequately deepened."

Debate on a lesser scale marked discussions regarding the relationship between a lessened sense of sin in the world and a lessened use of confession.

Bishop Vaughan blamed the lessened sense of sin for less frequent use of confession.

"Confessions have fallen off because of a diminished sense of need for redemption," he said Oct. 4. "Salvation seems assured to everyone and fear of going to hell has faded; even the synod documents seem to reflect this. We need a clear teaching on the possibility of losing our souls and on how we need the church for salvation."

Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich of Armagh, Northern Ireland, however, took a different view.

"People nowadays look on the sacrament of penance as a special act, a special grace. We should build on this," he said Oct. 5. "We should be satisfied if the majority of Catholics confess four or five times per year."

Sources at the synod said that synod propositions urge better formation of confessors and better religious instruction of the laity in order to address the sense of sin problem, and to create more appreciation for the sacrament.

The significance of systematic social injustices, called structural sin or social sin at the synod, and its relationship to individual sin also was a key issue. As a body, the synod delegates decried human rights abuses, discrimination and an unbalanced international economic order whereby, they said in their message to the world, "the rich become richer and the poor, poorer."

But how theologically to connect structural sin to personal sin was left unanswered. Even the pope had a question.

"If one may and must speak in an analogical sense about social sin, and also about 'structural sin' -- since sin is properly an act of the person -- for us, as pastors and theologians the following problem arises," the pope said. "What penance and which social reconciliation must correspond to this 'analogical' sin?"

A third act, the pope's leading the synod delegates in the Stations of the Cross, Oct. 28, exemplified a third synod theme: that penance and conversion must be a part of the Christian's life. During the act, the pope, Cardinal Bernardin and Cardinal Manning took turns carrying the cross.

Describing the devotional exercise, Pope John Paul said it was "a communitarian act of penance" which the synod delegates had called for repeatedly during the synod.

The pope stressed the importance of such acts of penance Oct. 29 and said fasting, alms, prayer and other daily forms of penance, imposed by life or chosen voluntarily, bears witness to God.

For U.S. synod delegates, the final message by strong criticism by Cardinal Aurelio Sabattani, president of the Vatican's highest court. He said U.S. courts were granting too many marriage annulments and questioned the competence of U.S. marriage tribunal judges.



Pope John Paul II addresses bishops in the Vatican Synod Hall during the closing session of the world Synod of Bishops. At right is Archbishop Josef Tomko, outgoing synod secretary.

Archbishop Roach and Archbishop Edmund Szoka of Detroit, a papally appointed synod delegate, defended the U.S. procedures, saying they are in keeping with church norms. Archbishop Roach and Cardinal Bernardin promised that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops would make a formal response.

The final week of the synod included the election of the synod council, responsible for the work of the 1983 synod and for preparing for the next synod. Cardinal Bernardin was re-elected as one of the 12 elected members of the council. The pope added his own three appointments: Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo of Medellin, Colombia; Cardinal Archbishop Maxim Hermaniuk of Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Cardinal Ratzinger.

During the synod, delegates took turns lunching with the pope. U.S. delegates said that conversations included the U.S. bishops' peace pastoral. Cardinal Bernardin said the pope expressed interest and approval of it.

Another issue raised during the synod was the nature of the synod, which currently is a consultative body to the pope, but which one synod official said could be upgraded.

Archbishop Roach, in discussing the authority of the synod, said the pope sidestepped the issue by telling the U.S. delegates that "the synod is synodal."

In his closing speech, the pope re-emphasized the synod's consultative nature. But he added, "It is difficult not to perceive to what extent this 'counsel' at the same time carries important ecclesial weight."

At the beginning of the synod Archbishop Josef Tomko, secretary general of the synod, said the bishop was considering the possibility of giving juridical weight to synod statements.

"This form would be explained at the beginning of the document which would have on the one hand the moral authority of such a highly qualified assembly and on the other hand juridical authority, over and above the moral authority, binding for the whole church," said a Vatican summary of Archbishop Tomko's speech.

"Such a document could be another mark of collegiality," said Archbishop Tomko, as long as it is accompanied by papal approval.

Sarah
Child



All in the Family

20 Years Later Going Strong

Twenty years ago today my husband and I were married in St. Elizabeth Church, Smethport, Pa. Father James Weber (known affectionately to his parishioners as Cereedy) performed the ceremony.

So many of the details of that day stand out clearly: My mother slim and beautiful in a beige sheath. My dad walking me down the aisle. Friends and relatives from Albany and Rochester in the pews.

Movies taken of our return walk down the aisle show me sporting a wide, unseemly grin. Even then

I knew how good my catch.

For our wedding trip, we wore causal clothes. My brother-in-law Ted with his fine sense of what is appropriate poked fun at my black slacks and nubby fuschia and white sweater as a going away outfit. His wife, my sister Thom, had started their married life at the same spot a few years before in a lovely tailored outfit and Greta Garbo chapeau.

My bridegroom and I headed for the Poconos, one of the honeymoon resorts which specialize in red, heart-shaped bathtubs and planned activities. But when it came time to take the turn off we both shook our heads

forfeiting a sizeable deposit.

Instead we headed for New York City. Because of a Jewish holiday which had filled the hotels, we had a great deal of trouble finding a room. When we did get one, it was 20 floors up, a situation I found unsettling since I was (and am) afraid of heights.

We spent the week going to the opera at the Old Met (Don Giovanni), to Broadway theater (Oliver), the Metropolitan Museum and finally Port Said, a sleazy tavern with scantily clad bellydancers where customers tossed dollar bills at the performers and had the best time of all.

We went shopping and bought a pumpkin-colored wool skirt which I refuse to throw away and a crystal pitcher and blue casserole at the Pottery Barn, both items which are still in daily use.

We dined at least once

in a French cafe, La Cave Henri IV, where we ate coq au vin, drank Puligny Montrachet and a man at the next table slipped the strolling violinist a bill to play La Vie En Rose for us.

We quarreled a lot on our honeymoon. My shoes were too tight, Oliver was vapid, it rained when it shouldn't have and taxis were scarce. To be consistent, we have quarreled every anniversary thereafter for which reason(s) either of us would be hard put to tell.

By current standards, our marriage should have ended long ago and might have but for the fact that the man I married is warm, loving, intelligent, caring and funny. In short, he is everything I had hoped for in a husband when we so blindly united in 1963.

Twenty years later he is my best friend.

Happy anniversary, love.