

Church Must Understand Feminism Better To Solve Problems of Women Religious: Pope

Rome (NC) — The Church must better understand feminism if it wants to solve problems facing women Religious, Pope John Paul II told women Religious leaders during a series of luncheon meetings.

He spoke of feminism in the context of why religious vocations have dropped. The pope also said that:

- women Religious should be paid adequately for their work,

- apostolically the presence of women Religious is more important in the local Church than that of a priest,

- there is a "crisis in maternity" in the Western

world and "physical and spiritual" maternity are intimately linked to woman's identity.

The pope expressed the views during nine hours of conversations in June and July with 10 representatives of women's Religious orders. The comments were quoted indirectly in a report prepared by the women.

NC News Service obtained a copy of the eight-page report which was sent to 2,000 women Religious leaders around the world after having been reviewed by the Vatican Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.

The concerns of women Religious included the vocations crisis, their relationships with bishops and the loss of respect for Religious in secular societies.

The women Religious expressed concern over the lack of vocations to Religious life and said that "long term commitment is sometimes lacking because of the changing social and political environment," the report said.

The pope "commented that in his contacts throughout the world, he finds two characteristics among young people: a strong secularization and a spiritual awakening (a breath of the spirit)," the report said. "He noted as well the resurgence of vocations to the priesthood but not to feminine Religious life."

The pope "stated that it appears today that young women are less sensitive to the call to Religious life than are young men. In the past, the opposite was true," the report added.

The discussion on vocations included, the report said, "a challenge to Religious women to confront the problems of vocations, and a call to bishops, priests and seminarians to reach a better understanding of Religious consecration in order to promote Religious life and vocations."

Feminism was brought up as a factor in the decline in vocations, and the pope expressed "his conviction that we must deepen our understanding of the women's movements in order to understand the problems of Religious life," the report said.

The report indicated that the pope also acknowledged the positive and negative aspects of feminism, and said that, "reactions against the abuses of men are justified."

The meetings took place over lunch in the pope's apartment June 7, June 14 and July 5, the report said. Attending were members of the executive committee of the International Union of Superiors General, Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, prefect of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, and Archbishop Augustin Mayer, congregation secretary.

The International Union of Superiors General is composed of the heads of female Religious orders.

The report said the pope "expressed concern regarding the crisis in maternity in the Western world and stated that he sees maternity — physical and spiritual — as intimately related to woman's identity."

The nuns told the pope that a changing society requires a changing role for Religious who now increasingly work "in collaboration with the laity, often individually" rather than in large numbers and together in schools and hospitals as they had in the past, the report said. The nuns added that appreciation of Religious life has lessened.

"Often in the past, Religious were admired and accepted," the report said. "In societies marked by secularism, this is frequently no longer the case, and Religious find themselves more closely identified with Jesus Christ in his rejection."

In response, "the holy fa-

ther stated his conviction that apostolically the presence of women Religious in a local Church is more important than that of a priest."

The report added that "in many places, the presence of the Church is in fact the presence of the Religious."

The women introduced the topic of the relationship between bishops and Religious and said that "at times there is a tension between Religious and bishops because of differing concepts of authority or because areas of authority are poorly defined," the report said.

"Problems are also created when a bishop considers 'dialogue' as the communication of a decision which has already been made. Today we see dialogue as searching together for a common solution to questions of mutual concern."

The pope "asked if sisters working in parishes receive adequate remuneration" and "strongly affirmed that sisters' remunerations should permit them to live in dignity and to perform adequate apostolic services."

The third meeting discussed religious life in the United States and took place after the announcement that the Vatican had initiated a study of U.S. religious life.

The report said the pope told the pope that "when cultural values are not recognized or respected, problems are created and communication becomes difficult."

Regarding the study of U.S. religious life, the report said the pope was told that greater consultation should have taken place prior to the decision to do the study.

"As a democratic country, the United States of America is sensitive to values of participation. A broader dialogue in preparation of a text which is of a particular interest to religious life throughout the world would have been appreciated. It seems strange to us that there was no consultation with the UISG or the USG," the report said.

UISG is the International Union of Superiors General. USG is the Union of Superiors General, composed of leaders of male Religious.

The report noted that "the holy father expressed his gratitude for the observations made regarding the United States which brought facts and helped interpret them. He also expressed his concern, reiterated by American bishops, regarding the decline of vocations in the United States."

During the discussion on inculturation, the women Religious raised the topic of religious garb.

"The holy father expressed his concern that there is a tendency (especially in Europe) to set aside much that is Religious. Is this tendency to be followed?" the report added.

It was pointed out that "to respect pluralism in the matter of religious dress seems required by a sensitivity to different cultures and to meaningful signs and symbols in those cultures," the report said.

"In some situations a religious habit might be necessary for evangelization; in others it might be a hindrance. The charisms of an institute must be considered in this question," it added.

Cardinal Pironio "mentioned at this point the problem which the habit presents for the approval of constitutions," the report said. "Though it is not an essential value, insistence on it has a way of dividing communities. A sign of religious consecration must identify us but cultural differences should be taken into account."

The report was sent in early December by UISG to its 2,000 members. St. Joseph Sister Dorothy Bujold, UISG executive secretary, said in answer to a question that the report was mailed after it had been seen by the congregation for Religious.

An accompanying cover letter by Notre Dame Sister Kay McDonald, UISG president, said, "Our holy father listened with great attentiveness and assured us that his listening was an explicit form of participation."

Participants at the meetings included U.S. Sacred Heart of Mary Sister Mary Milligan and Sister Bujold.

A similar series of nine-hour meetings occurred in 1983 between the pope and 11 leaders of male Religious Orders. These took place Jan. 15, May 10, May 24, and May 31. NC News Service also obtained a copy of the report of these meetings. USG sent the report to its members after the report had been reviewed by the congregation for Religious.

In a letter accompanying the report, Father Marcel Gendrot, a member of the St. Louis Marie Demontfort Order and secretary general of USG, said that the pope had sought advice from the religious men. He quoted the pope as saying, "the pope must not only be consulted but counselled."

The USG meetings, attended by Passionist Superior General Father Paul Boyle of the United States, included discussion of problems which Religious communities of men encounter in dioceses.

The report said that while Religious are an integral part of the 'local Church' they "must not be used only as supplementary forces, as a useful reserve personnel."

"They can be called upon at any moment to perform Church functions, but religious life must maintain its liberty of space which permits it to be itself to keep its power of prophetic challenge which is its prerogative in the service of the Church," the report added.

The priests and brothers also cited the need for dispensations from celibacy for some who have left the priesthood.

The report said that "as superiors general, we must be conscious of the fact that the priestly vocation is not something superficial or temporary. The commitment is absolute and definitive."

But the report added that

"each case must be judged separately."

"It would be a great help for everyone if a dialogue could be established between religious superiors and those responsible in the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith," the report said.

The report on the papal meetings with men Religious does not say which of the participants, including the pope, made specific comments.

The women's report on the other hand, separates the thought of the Religious superiors from the comments of the pope.

Boxing Tourney Scheduled

The third annual state Silver Gloves Boxing Tournament is scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 14-15, at the South Avenue Recreation Center. Junior boxers through 15 years of age are eligible to compete.

This year the event has been expanded to allow boxers from New England and New Jersey to participate. Already entered is the Silk City Boxing Club, a team from Patterson, N.J.

Returning is national champion Dion Austin, a member of the Rochester St. Martin's Boxing Club. Other area clubs participating are the Baden Street Boxing Club, North Street Boxing Club and Dutchtown Boxing Club.

The event is sponsored jointly by the National Silver Gloves Association and the Rochester Department of Recreation and Community Services. For further information, contact Don Simkin at 244-2812.

Focus on Eucharist

Focus on the Eucharist, an evening of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, will begin with Evening Prayer and the rosary, 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Jan. 5 at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse chapel, 4095 East Ave. Father John Madden, SJ, will celebrate Mass during the evening which will close with benediction. According to Joan M. Rand, organizer of the rites, "This is a very special time of prayer and meditation... and evening filled with peace and joy. The Mass is offered for our bishop and all the needs of the diocese besides our own intentions."

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Insights In Liturgy



By Father Thomas P. Mullen

Epiphany: Challenge And Gift

"Father of light, unchanging God, today you reveal to people of faith the resplendent fact of the Word made flesh. Your light is strong, your love is near; draw us beyond the limits which this world imposes, to the life where your Spirit makes all life complete." (Alternative Opening Prayer, Epiphany)

A new year has dawned! The Christmas Season nears its end! Time seems to call us to a sense of nostalgia. Remember the past? Memories draw us deeper and deeper into our life's experiences. Some we wish to live over; others we would rather forget. Into this quandry, Epiphany bursts with a flash of excitement.

A God of light — a friend of mine once spoke to me of a time when he seemed lost and wanted someone to listen to him. He tried several people (including myself) but no one seemed to be able to "lift the cloud from his mind." He went away for a few days, he returned (after a period of prayer) a new person. In his quiet moments, he found light. He had been spending so much time searching that he had never taken time to listen, to reflect, to be enlightened. By "getting away," he was able to have the darkness cleared and the light shine through the darkness... such is our God!

This God is also unchanging. Our annual time sequence (January-December) seems to move us in a circle. Our minds want to repeat what has gone before. This is impossible; we are changing. God is not changing! God is ever new, ever life-giving, ever fresh.

The spirit of Epiphany is one which invites the faithful into the reality of God. His loving freedom which allows people to be themselves. There is a definite presence that reaches us as we are not alone. God allows us to touch the past

with our minds as he ever encourages us to challenge the future.

God's greatest gift was the gift of life — the Word (the Son of God) made flesh to live among us as one like us. The commemoration of this gift-giving is now past. Epiphany reminds us the "resplendent fact" is still reality. The Eastern Church has a long tradition in celebrating Epiphany as their Christmas. Jesus' manifestation was the power of God becoming real before human eyes. Because of that God continues to be strong within and among his people. God is near because Jesus lives and remains present within his Church.

The invitation goes forth: don't sit idle, don't feel alone, don't give up hope! See the freedom which comes in being called "Christian." Experience the surge of power which belongs to the people so named. Look to this new year as a challenge and a gift. It is a challenge in that the faithful are charged to continue the Lord's transformation. It is a gift because God has freely offered a faithful people time, history and eternal life.

My favorite memories come from the times I could gather with my parents and brothers and sisters around our family Christmas tree. In the early hours of Christmas morning, with the morning stars disappearing, and the shimmering icicles swaying on the tree, this motley crew would gather and share, clean-up, have breakfast and go off to church together. It is a scene repeated in many households. There was something special about that time. We were united in a common effort. We all became captivated by the same spirit. The warmth of love enveloped us all. The challenge then (and it remains so now) to make this a reality the whole year through.

Epiphany presents us with the challenge and the gift until the "Spirit makes all life complete."