

POPE

Pope Addresses Cardinals on Church Doctrine

Vatican City (NC) — Here are excerpts from an NC News translation of Pope John Paul II's Dec. 21 talk to Vatican officials and members of the College of Cardinals in Rome.

Your eminences, venerated brothers and collaborators:
1. "Dominus prope est" (The Lord is near) (Phil 4:5). The by-now-imminent recurrence of the holy feast of Christmas has once more brought us together for this beautiful custom of exchanging good wishes. The cardinal dean has given expression to our common sentiments. By means of appropriate and lofty words, he has brought us into that atmosphere filled with joyous hope which belongs to this festivity so dear to the hearts of all. I thank him with fraternal affection, and, together with him, thank all of you for being here today. In your presence I am pleased to see confirmation of that will for communion in service to the church which renders daily labor unanimously noble and religiously meaningful.

"Dominus prope est." With our souls brimming with gratitude we get ready to kneel down with the shepherds before the manger on that holy night: before that manger at which the "virgin-mother" announced by the prophet Isaiah (7:14) keeps watch with trembling affection. We know that in that frail human creature, still-incapable of uttering a word, the eternal word of God, the uncreated wisdom which rules the universe, comes near to us. He is the light of God which "shines in the darkness," as the apostle John says. But John at once adds with bitter realism that the "darkness did not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). Light and darkness confront each other before the manger where the child lies: the light of truth and the darkness of error. It is a confrontation which does not permit neutrality: one must choose on which side to stand. This is a choice in which every human being has his future at stake. The child in the manger would one day become an adult and say: "If you live according to my teaching, you are truly my disciples; then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31ff).

2. In becoming flesh so as to dwell among us (cf. Jn 1:14), the word of God comes to bring us the priceless gift of knowledge of the truth: the truth about him, the truth about us and about our transcendental destiny. Man cannot build himself nor his own freedom except on the foundation of this truth. It is therefore an extremely valuable gift: it must be guarded and defended. Loss of only a part of the whole truth, throbbing in the heart of that child "wrapped in swaddling clothes" and lying in the manger (Lk 2:12), would mean man prejudicing full realization of himself, to a more-or-less degree.

The church is aware of this. She knows that she was constituted the depository and guardian of such truth. So she feels invested with a special mission, making her duty-bound to a particular service to mankind: to every generation which arrives to populate the earth she has to reveal the marvelous design which God predisposed in his only begotten son for the good of every son of man disposed to accept the marvelous initiative of his love in faith. This is why the church, and, in the church, the Roman See of Peter particularly, keeps watch by the crib at Bethlehem. She is vigilant in order that those transcendent values which the Creator has offered to mankind — the truth and liberty in truth — which is as much as to say love — shall not be obscured, even less, deformed. She keeps watch in order that, in spite of all contrary currents, such values may continually revive and affirm themselves ever more and more in the lives of individuals and families, the Christian community and the civil community — in a word, in the life of the whole human family.

3. The church has a consciousness of these values which is at once manifold and unitary. This was well brought out by the dogmatic constitution "Lumen Gentium," in a well-known passage. The 20th anniversary of promulgation of that dogmatic constitution fell just a month ago (Nov. 21). In No. 13 of that fundamental council document a reminder is given of the church's attitude in regard to the "wealth of capacities and customs" pertaining to the various peoples. The church sees them as so many "gifts," which the various cultures bring her. She is therefore well content to accept them, yet feels herself duty-bound to purify them, consolidate them and elevate them. In particular, by reason of that characteristic of universality which adorns and distinguishes her, the church knows that she must harmonize those "gifts" in a higher unity, in order that they may contribute to progressive affirmation of Christ's one single kingdom. So it is that "by virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole church. Through this common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts are reinforced."

There is more: continuing that line of thought, the council text propounds a fundamental thesis of Catholic ecclesiology. It states that "in the ecclesiastical communion the particular churches hold a rightful place. These churches retain their own traditions without in any way lessening the primacy of Peter. This chair presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences; at the same time it sees that such differences shall not hinder unity, but contribute toward it."

It would be difficult to express that with greater clarity and depth: the universal church is presented as a communion of (particular) churches, and indirectly as a communion of nations, languages, cultures. Each of these brings its own "gifts" to the whole, just as do single human generations and epochs, particular scientific and social gains, and the stages of civilization which are gradually attained.

4. There is much insistence today on the "special" Christian experiences which particular churches have in the socio-cultural contexts in which each is called upon to live. Such specific experiences, it is emphasized, concern both the word of God, which ought to be read and comprehended in the light of facts emerging from one's own existential path, and they concern liturgical prayer. The latter should look to the culture in which it is rooted for the signs, gestures and words serving for adoration, worship and celebration; they concern theological reflection, which ought to draw on the categories of thought typical of each culture. Finally, they concern the ecclesial community itself. It has its roots in the Eucharist, but depends in its concrete development on historical-temporal conditions, deriving from being rooted in the environment of a certain country or a certain part of the world.

These perspectives are not without interest, because of lines of theological research which they seem to open up in regard to the inexhaustible mystery of the church, and, even more, the possibilities which they offer the faithful for perceiving the immense wealth of new life brought by Christ and making them more fully their own. But they are views which, in order to be fruitful, presuppose respect for an unavoidable condition. The condition is that such experiences must not be lived isolatedly, or in an independence — not to say adverse — fashion as regards those who live in the church in other parts of the world. In order to constitute authentic experiences of church, they entail the necessity of being in tune with those which other Christians, in contact with different cultural contexts, feel called to live in order to be faithful to demands arising from the one single and identical mystery of Christ.

5. The affirmation touches upon a central point of Catholic ecclesiology and deserves to be repeated and stressed. Indulging "isolationist" orientations and favoring outright "centrifugal"

tendencies is contrary to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. In the already-cited No. 13, "Lumen Gentium" brings out the possibilities involved in healthy pluralism. But it also defines its frontiers with great clarity: true pluralism is never a factor for division, but an element contributing to construction of unity in the universal communion of the church.

An ontological relationship of reciprocal inclusion actually exists among the particular churches: inasmuch as it is a realization of the one single church of Christ, every particular church is present in some way in all the particular churches "in which and from which the unique Catholic Church has its existence" ("Lumen Gentium," 23). This ontological relationship ought to be expressed on the dynamic plane of concrete life, if the Christian community does not wish to enter into contradiction with itself: the basic ecclesial choices made by the faithful of a community ought to be able to harmonize with those of faithful of the other communities, so as to give rise to that communion of minds and of hearts for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper: "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you...that they may be one in us... That their unity may be complete" (Jn 17:21-23).

6. A particular task of the Apostolic See consists exactly in serving this universal unity. Indeed, that is where its specific office lies, and, we may say, the charism of Peter and his successors. Was it not to him that Christ said, before the dark night of betrayal: "But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail; you in turn must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:32)? He is in fact the "rock" upon whom Christ willed to build his church (cf. Mt 16:18). And it is precisely from the foundation that one expects the compact solidity of the entire edifice to arise. Therefore, after the resurrection, Jesus left Peter the following exigent mandate, in a dialogue charged with pathos: "Feed my lambs...Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15ff). Certainly, the unique supreme pastor is the incarnate Word, Christ the Lord. The pope therefore, with spontaneous impulsion, makes these words of St. Augustine's his own: "We are pastors (shepherds) to you, but we are sheep with you under that shepherd... We are teachers to you from this place, but under that one teacher in this school we are fellow disciples with you." ("Enarrationes in Psalmum," 126:31). However, this does not do away with the fact that each has a specific task in the church and will have to render account of it to Christ himself one day. Over the centuries the popes have keenly felt the responsibility of the service to Catholic unity which has been entrusted to them and have tried to provide for it in many ways, surrounding themselves with experienced collaborators in order to face up to the manifold requirements of their office better. Recently, in response to suggestions from the council assembly, the will to "internationalize" the Curia has been expressed, so that the presence there of officeholders coming from the various parts of the world could facilitate dialogue with the churches living on the various continents. This morning I have the joy of meeting with select representatives of the offices in which the Roman Curia is organized. I willingly take advantage of the occasion, dearest brothers in Christ, to express my appreciation to you and thank you for the skillful collaboration which you generously give me in my daily performance of the offices inherent in my ministry.

You live, as I do, that "solicitude for all the churches" which constitutes the "daily tension" mentioned by the apostle Paul (2 Cor 11:28). It constitutes the daily tension of every pope. It pertains to the successors of Peter in fact to provide for those "gifts," to which the council text already alludes, to flow together toward the center of the church; it is for them again to ensure that those same "gifts," enhanced through reciprocal comparison, may be able to flow out again into the various members of the mystical body of Christ, bearing fresh impulses of life and fervor to them. Ordinary means exist for meeting that apostolic commitment. Among these stand out "ad limina" visits: in the course of the present year I have had the joy of receiving the episcopal conferences of the Pacific Ocean, El Salvador, Taiwan, Togo, Lesotho, Peru, Greece, Sri Lanka, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Guinea, Ecuador, the Antilles, Bolivia, Paraguay.

And there are extraordinary means. Among these, the pope's visits and pilgrimages to particular churches on the various continents are showing themselves to be particularly effective. Still lively in my mind is the pleasing memory of the apostolic journey made at the beginning of May to Korea, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Thailand, for the sake of sharing the concerns and hopes of the young and promising churches of those lands. Significant likewise was the journey which took me to Switzerland in the month of June. It enabled me to confirm the See of Rome's ties of communion with the noble churches of that nation. Also unforgettable are the emotions lived during the journey in Canada, in contact both with persons who live their faith at the heart of a highly advanced society and with persons who have received the Gospel message in the context of ancient aboriginal civilizations. Finally, the journey which I made at the middle of October was important, though rapid. During it I touched upon Spain, and arrived at Santo Domingo, the land that is where evangelization shone for the first time on the new continent, five centuries ago. On that occasion I was similarly able to meet the population of Puerto Rico.

I joyfully also remember the pastoral visits made in Italy over the course of the year: to Bari, Bitonto, Viterbo, Fano, Alatri, then, at the beginning of October, to the churches of Calabria, then the pilgrimage made last November to the places sacred to the memory of St. Charles, on the fourth centenary of his death.

The Apostolic See maintains a thick network of contacts with all the particular churches, in continual concern not to allow the loss of any "gift from on high" (cf. Jas 1:17), and at the same time to safeguard the invaluable treasure of the truth of God, together with everything of perennial validity which it has caused to sprout in the fertile soil of Christian generations in the course of the centuries. So, neither preconceived conclusions nor deplorable ignorance, but constant attention to "the Spirit's word to the churches" (Rv 2:7), so that everything authentically proceeding from him may be to the advantage of the entire structure of the mystical body of Christ.

7. In this context there is need to emphasize as well the special responsibility which — "cum Petro et sub Petro" (with Peter and under Peter) — the entire episcopate has in regard to "the deposit of faith," which Christ entrusted to the church, in order that it may be integrally safeguarded and faithfully taught to human generations of all ages. How can we not indeed recall the solemn words with which Jesus took farewell of his apostles at the moment of his return to the Father? They constitute a precise mandate: "Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded to you" (Mt 28:18ff). Everything. No part of the "deposit" may be set aside, mishandled or neglected. In awareness of that, the apostle Paul addressed a categorical imperative to the disciple Timothy. "Depositum custodi." — Guard what has been committed to you. (1 Tim 6:20); and he enjoined him: "I charge you to preach the word, to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient — correcting, reproving, appealing — constantly teaching and never losing patience" (2 Tim 4:2). Every historical epoch is actually exposed to the temptation "not to tolerate sound doctrine," but to "surround themselves with teachers who tickle their ears, they will stop listening to the truth and wander off to fables" (cf. ibid. 3ff).

Our epoch too is exposed to this temptation. A precise duty is therefore incumbent on today's pastors and guides of the people of God: that of defending the authenticity of the Gospel teaching from everything infecting or deforming it. Certainly, we ought to know how to recognize and receive what "good" our generation can give expression to, so as "to purify it, consolidate it, and elevate it." The council reminded us of this (cf. "Lumen Gentium," No. 13). But we must also courageously reject what bears the mark of error and of sin; that which entails essential threats to the truth and morality of man; that which spreads itself in society with underhanded maneuvers and overbearing impositions and attacks the dignity of the person and the inalienable rights of individuals and of nations.

The church has the right to keep watch in order to defend the integrity of the Catholic faith and doctrine, issuing warnings against what insidiously seeks to infect them. That is her precise task; she cannot abdicate from it.

8. For its part also, the Holy See carries through this task of promotion and safeguard in regard to the "depositum fidei" with the aid especially of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As is well known, after the Second Vatican Council, the procedure which that sacred dicastery follows in examining persons and writings subjected to its judgment was somewhat modified, with intent to offer every guarantee to the persons concerned: safeguard of the truth is a sacrosanct and inseparable duty of the church's, and is not attained by in any way overriding the dignity and rights of persons.

Whoever will look at things with dispassionate objectivity cannot but recognize — also in the light of recent occurrences — that the dicastery in question is constantly inspired, in its interventions, by rigorous criteria of respect for the persons with which it enters into relationship. It may be wished and hoped that an equally respectful attitude may always be assumed by such persons in regard to the dicastery itself, when it befalls them to pronounce in private or in public on its workings. A same principle ought to apply to every other member of the people of God, since that dicastery has no other aim than that of safeguarding from all insidious dangers what is the greatest good which Christianity possesses, the authenticity and integrity of the faith.

It is certainly very important for a sincere and open dialogue to be introduced within the church among the various components of the people of God. But such dialogue must be understood as the way of searching after what is true and right, not as an occasion for indulging in words and attitudes which appear to be difficult to reconcile with an authentic spirit of dialogue. Everyone ought to bear in mind the duty which he and she has in regard to the truth, most of all that which God has revealed and of which the church is custodian.

9. Before concluding, I would also make reference to a point which is particularly felt today, "the preferential option for the poor." The church solemnly promised to make it in the Second Vatican Council, when it declared: "As Christ... so the church encompasses with love all those who are afflicted with human weakness. Indeed she recognizes in the poor and the suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering founder. She does all she can to relieve their need, and in them she strives to serve Christ" ("Lumen Gentium," No. 8).

This "option" is emphasized with particular force by the episcopates of Latin America today; it has been repeatedly confirmed by me, after the example, in any case, of my unforgettable predecessor, Pope Paul VI. I willingly take this opportunity to repeat and stress that the commitment to the poor constitutes a dominant motive of my pastoral action and the constant solicitude accompanying my daily service to the people of God.

I have made and I do make that "option" my own; I identify with it. And I feel that it could not be otherwise, since this is the everlasting message of the Gospel. Thus did Christ, thus did the apostles of Christ, thus has the church done over the course of her 2,000-year history.

In view of the contemporary forms of exploitation of the poor, the church may not be silent. She also reminds the rich of their precise duties. Strong with God's word, (cf. Is 5:8; Jer 5:25-28; Jas 5:1,3-4), she condemns the not few injustices which unfortunately are committed today also against the poor. Yes, the church makes the preferential option for the poor her own. A preferential option, note well, not an exclusive or excluding option, for the message of salvation is meant for all. An option, moreover, which is essentially based on the word of God, not on criteria offered by human sciences or adverse ideologies, which often reduce the poor to abstract socio-political or economic categories. In any case, a firm and irrevocable option. As I said at Santo Domingo recently: "The pope, the church, and her hierarchy will go on being present in the cause of the poor man, his dignity, his promotion, his rights as a person, his aspiration to unpostponable social justice" (L'Osservatore Romano, Oct. 13, 1984, p. 4).

10. Through the special mission entrusted to it, the Apostolic See participates, however, in the church's experiences in the various parts of the world and therefore knows that the forms of poverty to which contemporary man is subjected are manifold; it feels itself to be under a moral obligation toward those other forms of poverty too.

Beside, and in a certain sense in face of, the poverty against which the episcopal conferences of Medellín and Puebla raised their voices, stands that which derives from being deprived of those spiritual goods to which man has a right by his very nature. Is not that man also poor who is subjected to totalitarian regimes which deprive him of those fundamental liberties in which his dignity as an intelligent and responsible person is expressed? Is not that man poor who is wounded by others like himself in his interior relationship with the truth, in his conscience, in his most personal convictions, in his religious faith? That is what I have recalled in my preceding interventions, particularly in the encyclical "Redemptor Hominis" (No. 17) and in the speech delivered to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1979 (Nos. 14-20), when I spoke of violations committed today in the sphere of man's spiritual goods. There is not only poverty which strikes the body; there is another, more insidious poverty, which strikes the conscience, violating the most intimate sanctuary of personal dignity.

Into this context of authentic option for the poor on the part of the church enters an event which has had great resonance this year: publication, that is, of the "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation." Contrary to a number of distorted interpretations which have been given of it, that document does not oppose the option for the poor, but rather constitutes an authoritative confirmation of it and effects a clarification and deepening of it at the same time.

By bringing out the intimate and constitutive bond which joins liberty to truth, the instruction defends the poor from illusory and dangerous ideological proposals for liberation. These begin from real, dramatic situations of misery and would make the poor and their suffering the pretext for fresh, sometimes graver, oppressions. Reduction of the Gospel message to the socio-political dimension alone robs the poor of what constitutes a supreme right to them: that of receiving from the church the gift of the entire truth on man and on the presence of the living God in their history.