

# Dialogue brings opportunities, difficulties

By John Thavis

Rome (NC) — The dialogue with the modern world sparked by the Second Vatican Council generally has been good for the church, but has brought practical difficulties and risks for the faith.

That is the view of several Vatican officials responsible for implementing the council's teachings on human society. The officials were interviewed by National Catholic News Service in Rome.

They said the church has enhanced its moral influence by speaking more clearly than ever on social justice and peace since the council ended in 1965.

The council also initiated gradual progress in dialogue with non-Christian religions, especially Judaism and Islam, the officials said.

Dialogue with non-believers has resulted in valuable knowledge about modern atheism, they said, and has produced joint statements on science and research.

In general, the church's "opening to the world" as expressed in council documents, particularly "Gaudium Et Spes" (Pastoral

Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), should be reaffirmed by the upcoming Synod of Bishops, they said. The synod is scheduled to meet at the Vatican Nov. 24-Dec. 8 to evaluate the results of Vatican II.

But the officials also cited dangers and problems that emerged as the church sought to implement "Gaudium et Spes."

Among them were: the risk that in the name of dialogue, some Catholics might accept prevailing cultural values; that certain ideological groups might exploit dialogue with the church for propaganda purposes; and that in their work for social justice, church organizations might become single-issue groups, or become overly influenced by secular ideologies.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between culture and faith, "Gaudium et Spes" emphasized the values and goals the church shares with most modern societies. It said a fully lived faith means collaborating to improve society.

Several of those interviewed said that the document, the council's longest and most wide-ranging, had suffered from a too optimistic "partial reading."

French Cardinal Paul Poupard, who heads the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Secretariat for Non-Believers, said the constitution sometimes has been misunderstood as simply embracing modern culture.

He noted that the document's first words, "Gaudium et Spes" (Joy and Hope) were followed by "luctus et angor" (grief and anguish), which refer to what is wrong in the world.

"The council said both, but only one part has been stressed," Cardinal Poupard said.

As a result of "incomplete" understanding of the council, he said, "it's the Christians who have adapted to the global culture instead of being a leaven against it." He cited abortion as an example.

Many Catholics around the world have aligned with the prevailing culture on the issue, and against clear church teaching, he said.

Cardinal Poupard said he blamed the situation on a relative silence among contemporary Catholics regarding the need for prayer and solid doctrinal education, which should go hand-in-hand with dialogue.

"I share Cardinal (Joseph) Ratzinger's belief that there is a crisis of faith today," he said. "Some Christians, turning to the world, have forgotten that they are to convert the world, and not be converted by the worldly spirit."

He said he hoped the synod would help "overcome these errors."

Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, sounded a similar theme in the 1985 book "The Ratzinger Report." He said that after the phase of an "indiscriminate opening to the world," Christians should now re-discover "the courage of non-conformism" and the capacity to denounce cultural trends.

Cardinal Poupard and others spoke of progress in bringing the church's message to modern societies.

Catholic and Marxist experts meeting last year in Yugoslavia, for example, came to basic agreements on science and faith, Cardinal Poupard said. The meeting affirmed the fundamental freedom of scientific research, the primacy of truth and the ethical dimension of all such research, he said.

The main task in the church's dialogue with non-believers, Cardinal Poupard said, was "to confront the challenge of contemporary atheism."

To the secretary of the Secretariat for Non-Believers, Spanish Father Jordan Gallegos, that means "the study of the problems that have brought society to unbelief." Those problems have changed over 20 years, he said.

Particularly in non-communist countries, formal and militant atheism has diminished, Father Gallegos said. "An official atheist is hard to find these days," he said.

But it has been replaced by widening agnosticism or religious indifference, Father Gallegos said, and it is difficult to conduct a dialogue with people uninterested in religious problems.

Father Gallegos and others said some groups have attempted to exploit dialogue. Marxists seem to want to talk when they are out of power, Father Gallegos said, but otherwise are not interested.

Cardinal Poupard said he recently told an East European professor who wanted to teach a class on Marxism at a pontifical university that such an arrangement could be made. But when asked if a class on Catholicism could be set up in an East European university, the professor replied "unthinkable," the cardinal said.

Cardinal Gabriel-Marie Garrone, a Frenchman who led discussion on "Gaudium et Spes" at the council and later became the first president of the council for culture, said the last 20 years have taught the church to look more realistically at the world.

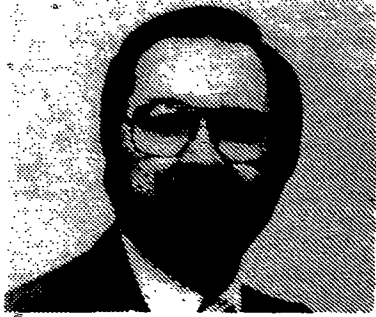
The document, he said, had an "abstract" vision of man — which some criticize as being too optimistic. He said he could understand the criticism leveled by Cardinal Ratzinger and others who see dangers in the contact between the church and the "concrete reality" of the modern world.

But Cardinal Garrone said he believes the council's "opening" to the world has been positive.

The council linked faith with social action that aims at solving economic inequalities, peace and human rights. Much progress has been made in these areas, officials said — by the pope, Vatican organizations such as the Justice and Peace Commission, bishops' conferences and other church groups.

"The image of the church in the world has much improved," said Cardinal Poupard. The church "is now recognized in many countries as the only place of freedom in the world. This is important."

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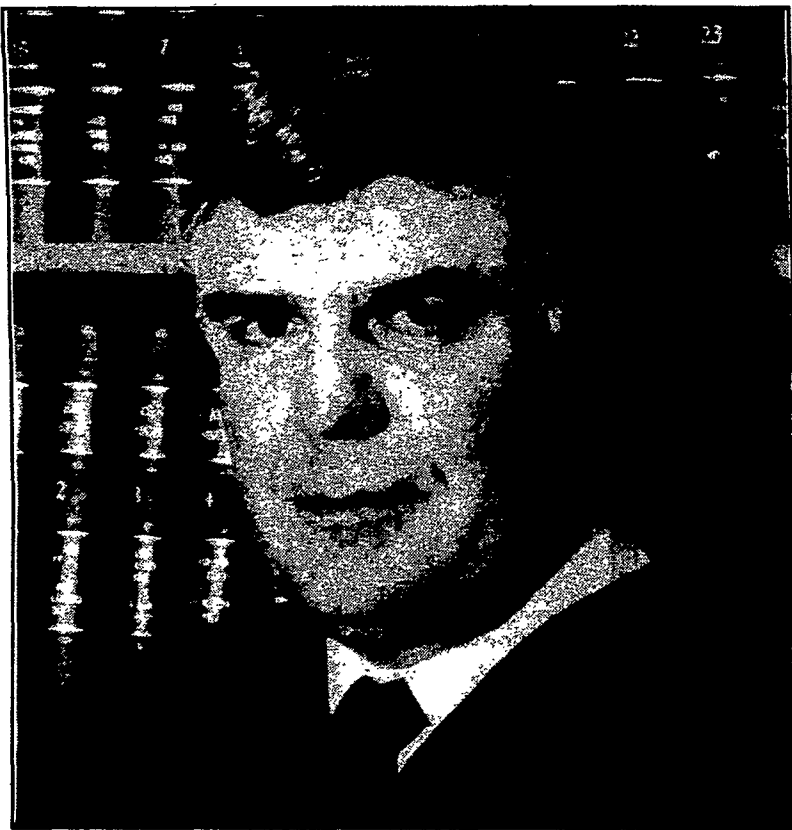
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