

Church showing greater sensitivity in missionary effort

By John Thavis

ROME (NC) — Since the close of the Second Vatican Council 20 years ago, the church has pursued its mission of "preaching the Gospel to all men" with greater sensitivity to local peoples and their customs, according to church leaders in Rome.

The result has been a diminishing role for foreign missionaries, and greater evangelizing role for native churches, they said in interviews with National Catholic News Service.

But disagreement remains over how much and how quickly local traditions should be adopted by native churches — particularly in the Mass and sacraments.

The churchmen suggested that clearer guidelines on inculturation in missionary territories should be defined by the Nov. 24-Dec. 8 extraordinary Synod of Bishops, called by Pope John Paul II to evaluate the results of Vatican II.

Although the word "inculturation" is not found in the council's "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity" (Ad Gentes), the idea was clearly there: "The Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture," the document said. Local traditions, "illuminated by the light of the Gospel," will become part of a Catholic unity.

According to Indian Cardinal D. Simon Lourdasamy, a council participant and now secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the synod should aim at controlling situations where inculturation has "gone too far."

"If we want to evangelize people effectively, we've got to have inculturation, we've got to make the Christian message incarnate in the local culture," Cardinal Lourdasamy said. But, he added, "this must be done without losing the substance and identity of Christianity."

In Africa, where the church has grown rapidly, some adaptations of local traditions have not been studied well enough before being applied and some liturgical adaptations, such as using local foods for the Eucharist, have gone beyond what the church allows, he said.

Inculturation, Cardinal Lourdasamy said, should be coordinated by local bishops.

A more serious problem, the cardinal said, is that some missionaries have "looked the other way" when faced with local traditions that conflict with church teachings. For instance, "there's been a kind of compromise going on with polygamy" — the practice of taking more than one spouse.

Pope John Paul, on his Aug. 8-19 trip to Africa, pointedly denounced polygamy, which is common among African tribes. He also encouraged Africans to make the church their own, but within the lines of universal church teaching.

Father Heinrich Heekeren, superior general of the Divine Word missionaries, said

inculturation is being slowed by the Vatican's tendency to cling to European models.

"This pope often gives the impression of being very open to inculturation, but 'de facto' Rome — the Curia — is still putting the brakes on in many ways," he said.

Rome is too cautious when reviewing liturgical changes or even local theologies, although some — such as liberation theology — are immature, Father Heekeren said.

"We should be more confident, more trusting," Father Heekeren said. "These people, too, have the Holy Spirit."

Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, head of the Congregation for Bishops who has closely followed the church's development in his native Africa, described inculturation as a "long, long road" that must be taken "slowly and surely." The cardinal participated as a young bishop in the council's debate on missions.

Cardinal Lourdasamy said one of the most successful missionary developments since the council is "indigenization," the increasing role of native missionaries. In Asia, he said, more than 90 percent of missionary workers today are natives.

"Before the council, 80 percent of bishops in missionary countries were foreigners. Today it's vice-versa," he said.

The change has left some foreign missionaries resentful, Father Heekeren said. They sometimes must watch as mistakes are made or churches run differently in the "painful process of growth," he said.

"The overall conclusion, though, is positive. The locals have to take over, they have the right to make mistakes," he said.

Natives are playing a greater role in local lay pastoral groups, in catechetics and in the missionary orders themselves, Father Heekeren said. For example, his once exclusively Western order now has members from about 60 nations working in international teams.

Vocations dropped drastically immediately after the council, Father Heekeren said, but "in recent years we are picking up again, mainly in Africa and Asia."

According to Cardinal Lourdasamy, vocations within missionary territories have increased greatly since the council. He said there were more than 300 active, diocesan-level religious congregations in mission territories, most founded in the last 20 years, in addition to the 70 missionary congregations of pontifical rank.

In addition, the training of religious education teachers, a central point of the council's document on missions, has improved remarkably, he said.

The congregation now spends about \$16 million annually on some 46 missionary centers for the training of catechists, he said. The number of catechists has risen to 250,000, he said, and includes many lay people.

Ecumenism, at the center of the council's

agenda, has raised some debate when applied to the missionary field. Catholic missionaries often evangelize in the same areas as missionaries of other Christian churches.

Cardinal Lourdasamy said ecumenism has been of "vital importance" in ending disputes among missionaries of different faiths. He described their fighting before the council as a "scandal."

But Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has warned in a recently published book that ecumenical efforts in mission countries risk neglecting Catholic unity.

Speaking of an interdenominational association of African theologians, the cardinal said in the book, "The Ratzinger Report": "With an association of this kind, we cannot exclude that what is regarded as 'African' may put the common awareness of what is Catholic in the shade."

The cardinal also said that the church's teaching that every man is called to salvation has been "put forward in an extreme form since the council" in a way that views non-Christian religions as an ordinary, rather than extraordinary, path to salvation.

This has "caused the missionary zeal of many to slacken," he said.

"Many missionaries thought, 'if they can be saved anyway, why should we make such an effort?'" Father Heekeren said. But while vocations are down, "the motivation for the missionary is now much deeper" and more in keeping with the idea that "the church is not the kingdom, she is only the way to the kingdom," he said.

The political and social activity of missionaries, like that of the rest of the church, has increased greatly since the council. Cardinal Lourdasamy said it was a good thing that today's missionaries are more active in protecting human rights.

Father Heekeren said that because missionaries are now more involved in helping poor people economically and socially, "more than ever they are misunderstood, persecuted and killed" by the more powerful.

Cardinal Gantin said that, despite the problems faces by mission churches, "the frontiers of the church have been widened" since the council. Particularly in the Third World, the church has grown in numbers and quality, he said.

Vatican II opened Church to world

By Jerry Filteau

(NC) — By far the longest, and easily one of the most important, most remembered and most quoted documents of the Second Vatican Council was "Gaudium et Spes," the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

With its opening words it definitively reversed a centuries-old "fortress" mentality of Catholic separation from, almost disdain for, the world:

"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.... This community (of the church) realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history."

"Gaudium et Spes" was formally passed only on the last working day of the council, Dec. 7, 1965. It was, in its own words, the attempt of the council "to explain to everyone how it conceives the presence and activity of the church in the world today."

Just the bare mention of all topics treated by the 23,000-word document would form a lengthy list. Some of the issues for which it is a major resource of church teaching are: human dignity, freedom, person, community, social justice, sin, death, technological advance and rapid social change, marriage, conjugal love, family life and responsibilities, culture, education, economic activity, work, leisure, stewardship, private property, political participation, church and state, citizenship, government, international relations, war, peace, the arms race, development of poorer nations, international organizations and law in a new world order, population, dialogue as a means of conflict resolution.

It was, in short, a general framework or overview document for Catholic social teaching.

The reference in the document's opening sentence to "especially those who are poor" was the modern starting point, though it clearly draws on scriptural themes, of what has come to be called the church's "preferential option for the poor."

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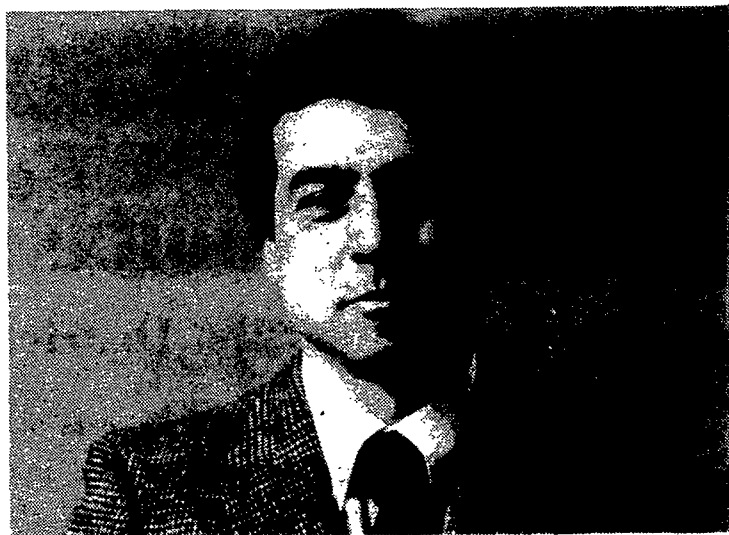
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