

Encyclical calls for devotion to spirit as cure for social sin

By John Thavis

Vatican City (NC) — A new papal encyclical called for a new devotion to the Holy Spirit as an antidote to personal and social sin in the modern age.

Denouncing the "frightful" spiritual decadence of contemporary society, Pope John Paul II described in the document a world filled with "signs of death," ranging from abortion and euthanasia to terrorism organized "on an international scale."

The 141-page encyclical, "Dominum et Vivificantem" (Lord and Giver of Life,) the pope's fifth, was released May 30 at the Vatican.

In it, Pope John Paul strongly contrasted the Church's message of life through the Spirit with "atheistic ideologies" that want to "root out religion." He says Marxism is a particularly dangerous form of materialism.

As the Church and the world approach the second millennium of Christ's coming, the pope said, they have a "special need of prayer." He singles out for praise those who have joined prayer and spiritual renewal movements in the Church.

The encyclical was dated May 18, Pentecost Sunday, the day the Church commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles.

Most of the document traces the role of the Holy Spirit as the "supreme guide" of the apostles, the institution of the Church, and contemporary humanity. But the pope's strongest language referred to social problems and ideologies which he said reject such guidance and reflect a "rebellion" against God.

"On the horizon of contemporary civilization," the pope said, "the signs and symptoms of death have become particularly present and frequent."

"One has only to think of the arms race and of its inherent danger of nuclear self-destruction," he said. Many areas of the world are "marked by death-dealing poverty and famine," and wars creating thousands of casualties, he added.

The pope said that "the taking of human beings even before they are born or before they reach the natural point of death" are "even darker signs of death." Abortion and euthanasia, he said, threaten to become institutions in some places.

"And how can one fail to mention the attacks against human life by terrorism,



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organized even on an international scale?" he asked.

Against the "dark shades of materialistic civilization," the pope said, the church proclaims "the life which is stronger than death." He said materialism, which accepts

death as the end of human existence, is the "clearest expression" of "resistance to the Holy Spirit" in society.

Materialism has today become a system of thought, a way of interpreting facts and a program of conduct, he said.

"The system which has developed most and carried to its extreme practical consequences this form of thought, ideology and praxis is dialectical and historical materialism, which is still recognized as the essential core of Marxism," he said.

The pope said atheism is "the striking phenomenon of our time" and a sign that throughout history there is "a constant pressure on man to reject God, even to the point of hating Him." God is mistakenly seen as an enemy or a limitation, he said.

"We see this confirmed in the modern age, when the atheistic ideologies seek to root out religion on the grounds that religion causes the radical 'alienation' of man," the pope said. He called the idea of the "death" of God "an absurdity."

Materialist ideologies, he added, see religion as "a kind of 'idealistic illusion' to be fought with the most suitable means and methods according to circumstances of time and place, in order to eliminate it from society and from man's very heart."

The encyclical urged Christians to free themselves from materialistic thinking and the "dominating structures and mechanisms" of materialistic society, by accepting the "liberation by the power of the Spirit." Churches and individuals living under persecution, the pope said, are "living proof" that this Spirit is alive in the world today.

In the face of "the frightful reality of man's spiritual decadence," individuals and communities are discovering prayer, the pope said. The growing popularity of prayer groups in the Church is "a significant and comforting sign," he said.

The pope also emphasized that the Holy Spirit should illuminate individual consciences, making them sensitive to good and evil. However, he warned against arbitrary decisions by the individual conscience, saying it must follow a principle of obedience.

"The conscience, therefore, is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil," the pope said.

The "gift of the Spirit" means a "call to friendship" and the possibility of a personal relationship with God, Pope John Paul said.

The pope also said the year 2,000 will mark a "new phase of man's history on Earth." In preparation, he said, the Church will "proclaim the Spirit" so that a growing number of people can "find themselves" through its gifts.

Economic pastoral

Continued from Page 1

The approach to global issues in the first two drafts of the economic pastoral was mainly to criticize U.S. policy toward such multilateral organizations and agreements. The third draft, however, indicated that poorer nations show growing distrust not only of U.S. policies in that regard, but of

those multilateral organizations and agreements themselves.

The third draft also warned of dangers to Third World "traditional cultures" posed by "the aggressive cultural penetration of Northern (especially U.S.) advertising and media programming. It did not, however, use the emotionally charged term "cultural

imperialism" that is often used to describe that phenomenon.

Archbishop Weakland said the new draft's treatment of global economic issues is more systematic than it was in the first two drafts, and it reflects more adequately the "urgency" of the economic crisis facing the poor nations of the Southern Hemisphere.

Reflecting increased attention to family life, the new version of the pastoral said that "impact on the strength and stability of family life" must be a basic norm for evaluating economic policies and decisions.

That new norm in the third draft was added to other norms, retained from the previous draft, which focused on the poor and marginalized. Those norms said that "the highest priority" of economic policy must be fulfilling the basic needs of the poor; their active participation in economic life must be "a high social priority"; and decisions on allocating human and material resources should be "specially directed" at them.

The new draft stressed that while "breakdowns of marriage and the family are more visible among the poor," the "false values" underlying those problems "pervade the whole of society."

Archbishop Weakland said that emphasis was included partly to counter the argument by some that the poor are poor because they are morally weak or irresponsible.

"There's no reason to single out the poor and harp on them when we think (the cultural crisis is) a much larger problem," said Ronald Kriemeyer, U.S. Catholic Conference director for domestic social development and chief staff aide to the pastoral's drafting committee.

The longer treatment of education in the third draft also focused attention on the full range of concerns, urging solid Catholic support for quality education in public schools as well as in Catholic schools.

The main thrust of other parts of the pastoral was not changed in the third draft.

In both second and third drafts — the second draft was issued last October — employment was called "the most urgent priority for domestic economic policy," and alleviation of poverty was described as "an imperative of the highest priority." Only

minor changes were made in the pastoral's detailed discussion of those positions.

Similarly, the section urging national policies to revitalize family farms was almost unchanged from second to third draft. The chapter on "a new American experiment" in economic partnership — described by some bishops as one of the most important and innovative sections of the pastoral — also stayed largely the same.

The small amount of substantive change between second and third draft tended to confirm earlier comments by Archbishop Weakland that the nation's bishops already agreed pretty thoroughly with the general thrust, structure and tone of the document and with most of its specifics when it appeared in the second draft.

If so, American Catholics could expect their bishops to approve the new document with few or no major changes when they debate it and vote on it this November.

Still to be written before the bishops meet this fall is a draft version of a far shorter pastoral statement, intended to communicate the basic message of the pastoral to millions of U.S. Catholics.

The first draft of that statement should be in the hands of the bishops a month or so before the November meeting, Kriemeyer said.

Other new elements in the new draft include:

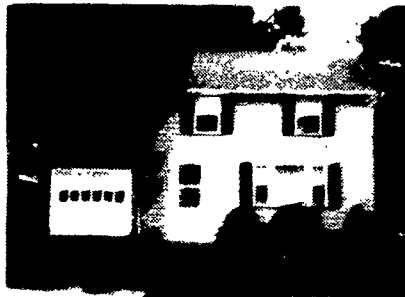
- A stronger focus on the life, ministry and example of Jesus, giving a more personal tone in the new draft's approach to Christian ethics when it is compared with the earlier drafts, which focused more exclusively on the content of Jesus' teachings.

- Praise of what Catholics can learn from Protestant traditions with their "strong emphasis ... on the vocation of lay people in the world." Draft two had focused on the Second Vatican Council as its chief source on lay vocations.

- A specific new recommendation to raise the U.S. minimum wage to take account of the 24 percent loss in the dollar's buying power since 1981.

- A stronger condemnation of racial discrimination, with the insertion of new language attacking continuing racism in America as "a sin that divides the human family."

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