

National/International Report

Canon Law Society criticizes Vatican in tensions with U.S.

By Harv Bishop

Denver (NC) — With speakers urging more open debate in the Church, the Canon Law Society of America passed a series of resolutions criticizing or questioning Vatican actions in recent controversies involving U.S. churchmen.

Resolutions passed by the society of church lawyers during their Oct. 13-16 meeting in Denver included:

- Criticism of the Vatican over its decision to limit the authority of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle.

- "Support for Archbishop Hunthausen in his current efforts to resolve as soon as possible the division caused by the (Vatican) action."

- Establishment of a task force to study "inadequacies" in procedures of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which the society said came to light in the record of the congregation's actions against Catholic University of America moral theology professor Father Charles E. Curran.

- A statement of appreciation for canon lawyer Father James H. Provost, also an object of Vatican criticisms.

Speakers at the meeting, which drew about 450 canon lawyers from around the country, included Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit and pastoral life researcher Father Philip Murnion of New York.

Bishop Gumbleton said in a talk Oct. 14 that the Church "can't cover over dissent with false peace and unity" brought about by silencing critics.

"Jesus offered his sword, and his sword was truth," the bishop said. "There should be challenges, and through discussion we get deeper and find true unity and peace. We have to be that way in the Church."

Father Murnion, director of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, said in an opening address Oct. 13 that open and public theological debate is essential to parish life, especially with the "increasingly educated Catholic populace" found in the United States.

In the Seattle case, after a two-year investigation the Vatican appointed Bishop Donald Wuerl as an auxiliary and instructed Archbishop Hunthausen to give Bishop Wuerl authority over several areas of archdiocesan governance, including liturgy, the archdiocesan court, and formation of seminarians and priests.

One resolution on the case simply expressed support for the archbishop in his efforts to end divisions and "restore peace and unity within the Church in Seattle."

The other, directed at the Vatican's procedures and decision in the case, said the

Vatican action "is perceived, in light of the widespread support given (Archbishop Hunthausen) by clergy, religious and laity in his diocese, as scandalous, divisive and injurious to the office of diocesan bishop."

It added that the decision "seems inconsistent" with principles regarding the authority of the local bishop that are stated in the

Second Vatican Council and in canon law.

The society's resolution regarding Father Provost, a former president of the society and its executive coordinator for the past six years, was phrased simply as an expression of appreciation for his service and his work as a teacher of canon law.

But one member, speaking on the resolu-

tion, called it "a vote of confidence ... in light of recent events," referring to Vatican reservations about some of the priest's writings shortly before he was approved this summer as a permanent member of the Catholic University faculty.

After the resolution passed, Father Provost received a standing ovation.

Attorney advises dioceses to deal with sex-abuse cases

By Julie Sly

Grandview, Mo. (NC) — Pedophilia is a subject priests, lay ministers, principals and teachers often want to ignore, but they must deal with it, said a Catholic attorney who has defended priests in such cases.

He suggested dioceses create a plan for evaluation and intervention to handle reports of sexual abuse of children and to help the victims and their families.

Pedophilia is the adult sexual desire for children.

Attorney F. Ray Mouton of Lafayette, La., spoke at a seminar at Coronation Parish, Grandview, in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo.

About 200 diocesan and religious priests, principals and lay ministers attended the session, which was part of a seminar on "Suffer the Children: Sexual Misconduct of Ministers in the Catholic Community."

"We must remember at all times that children are entrusted to us, all of us, by God, and when a perpetrator sexually molests a child," Mouton said, "be that person a lay person, a cleric or a religious, the very first thing that is taken from that child is that which is God's greatest gift, innocence."

Mouton is the lawyer who defended Father Gilbert Gauthier, a priest of the Lafayette Diocese who was sentenced last October to 20 years of hard labor without parole for sex charges.

The priest, suspended by the diocese, pleaded guilty to more than 30 crimes of child pornography and sexual abuse of children. The diocese has reached out-of-court financial settlements with a number of families in that case.

Another Lafayette priest, Father Ronald Fontenot, suspended in August 1983, is serving a one-year sentence in Spokane, Wash., for five charges of sexually molesting boys in Spokane.

Mouton said few people from the Catholic community are involved with pedophilia and emphasized that the Lafayette priests' cases were "a real exception."

He suggested that lawsuits against the Church could be prevented if dioceses formed evaluation and intervention plans to

deal with reports of sexual abuse of children and to help the victims.

He said Church ministers need to know their responsibility under Missouri law on child abuse to report such incidents.

Mouton gave a six-step strategy:

- Write down all the information when there is an initial complaint of sexual abuse.

- Evaluate the credibility of both the complainant and the complaint.

- Respond in the same setting (e.g., the school) and on the same day, even if the complaint seems invalid. Mouton warned against leaving the complainant "out in the

cold, alone, wondering and wandering into lawyers' offices."

- Take the complaint to a person of ultimate authority, such as superintendent of schools, a vicar general or the bishop.

- Confront the accused abuser in a meeting with a civil attorney, a diocesan official and a psychologist and form an intervention team to meet with the victims and the family.

- Decide whether the complaint is valid or invalid, and unless there is a certainty it is "absolutely invalid," comply with state law and report the suspected abuse to the proper civil authorities and start proceedings in compliance with canon law.

Nun sees sexism as Church's 'major challenge,' urges women to 'swamp chanceries' with letters

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — Overcoming sexism in both Church and world is one of the major challenges facing Catholic women today, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister said Oct. 10.

"We must swamp the chanceries and offices of the world with petitions for change," she said.

Sister Chittister, prioress of the Benedictine nuns of Erie, Pa., and head of the International Conference of Benedictine Women, was keynote speaker at "Women in the Church," a three-day conference in Washington that drew more than 2,500 Catholics, nearly all women.

The Church considers women equal to men "right up until where it counts," Sister Chittister said.

"We live in a society where they turn women away from their empty seminaries in droves, while in a sacramental Church people lack the sacraments," she said.

"We live in a society where a girl-child, ironically, may not even carry a cruet to the altar, because the Church — which teaches that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it — can, apparently, be brought to its knees by a little 11-year-old girl," she added.

"We live in a society," she continued, "where women are no longer allowed to preach the gospel, or minister the sacraments to the dying, or teach scripture to an 'ordinandi' (those preparing for ordination) ... There is nothing that a man of the Church can learn about God and faith and gospel from a woman of the Church."

At a press conference later, Sister Chittister called a recent Vatican letter excluding women from spiritual direction and pastoral supervision of seminarians "ridiculous."

"I hope to God Teresa of Avila never applies," she said, referring to a famous 16th-century Spanish spiritual writer and mystic.

Asked how she interprets the Vatican order, she said, "They do not want men to come to respect the spiritual depth of women." She called it "a good strategy, for the wrong reasons," to keep priests from dealing with women as equals.

Asked about an apparent "backlash" from Rome against the women's movement and other movements in the U.S. Church, and whether she thought the American Church would "stand up against Rome," Sister Chittister answered, "Do you want an answer or a prayer? Good God, I hope so."



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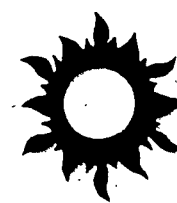
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