

National/International Report

Encyclical calls Mary model of 'femininity with dignity'

Pope's sixth letter kicks off Marian year

By John Thavis

Vatican City (NC) — In an encyclical dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, Pope John Paul II described Mary's life as an image of obedience and freedom, a model of "femininity with dignity" and an inspiration to Christian unity.

The 114-page document, titled "Redemptoris Mater" (Mother of the Redeemer), said Mary, as the "first to believe," is a guide for the Church and a "point of reference" for all humanity.

The encyclical emphasized Mary as the "common mother" of Catholics and Orthodox Christians, and took particular note of Mary's place among Christians living in various parts of the Soviet Union. It also stressed the value of Marian devotions.

The encyclical, the pope's sixth, was issued at the Vatican March 25, the feast of the Annunciation. It was written in preparation for the special Marian year called by the pope, to begin June 7, and reflected the pope's longstanding devotion to Mary.

Much of the papal letter is an extended spiritual reflection on Mary's "pilgrimage of faith," from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion to her assumption into heaven. Her "obedience of faith" shown from the Annunciation onward, was "heroic," it said.

Mary continues to accompany the Church's journey, the document said, which "in our own time is marked by the sign of ecumenism."

The encyclical acknowledged some "discrepancies of doctrine" between the Catholic and Protestant churches about Mary's role in salvation, but asked whether all Christians

could "look to her as our common mother, who prays for the unity of God's family."

One of the areas of disagreement between Catholics and Protestants has been Mary's role as "mediatrix," an interceder for mankind. The encyclical describes Mary's mediation as an important part of her "maternal care," but said it in no way diminishes the unique mediation of Christ.

Among Eastern churches, which have faced "frequent persecution, even to the point of bloodshed," Mary has been given a "privileged place," the document said.

It took special note of the approaching millennium of Christianity in what is now part of the Soviet Union. A few decades after the baptism in 988 of St. Vladimir, grand duke of Kiev, the schism between Eastern and Western Christianity occurred.

"Even though we are still experiencing the painful effects of the separation," the document said, "we can say that in the presence of the mother of Christ we feel that we are true brothers and sisters."

The pope praised the Eastern custom of placing images of the Virgin in places of honor in churches and homes.

"The icons are still venerated in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia and in Russia under various titles. They are images which witness to the faith and spirit of prayer of that people," the encyclical said.

The document also briefly touched on Mary's place in Church social teachings. The Church's "preference for the poor is wonderfully inscribed in Mary's Magnificat," it said, referring to the New Testament account of Mary's song of praise, which describes God who "has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly ... filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty."

The document said the Church is aware — "and at the present time this awareness is particularly vivid" — that the truth about salvation cannot be separated from God's preference for the poor and humble.

Mary's role also has "special importance in relation to women and their status," the document said.

It said this was illustrated "by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the incarnation of his son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman."

"It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement," it said.

The encyclical listed qualities that the Church sees in women, "in the light of Mary: ... the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement."

The presence of Mary in today's Church is seen in individual piety, traditional Marian devotions and "the radiance and attraction of the great shrines," the papal letter said. Such places make up a kind of "geography of faith," it said.

The pope, whose crest carries a large "M" for Mary, has frequently stressed devotion to the Blessed Virgin. His papal motto, "Totus tuus" ("Completely yours") is also dedicated to Mary.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers who wish to obtain the full text of the Marian encyclical



NC Photo

MARIAN ENCYCLICAL—This 500-year-old statue of Mary, by sculptor and architect Michael Pacher, stands on the altar of St. Wolfgang Church in northern Austria. The Vatican has announced that an encyclical on Mary will be released in conjunction with the Marian Year, which begins Pentecost Sunday.

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Oliphant cartoon draws protests from Syracuse Catholics

Syracuse (NC) — A Syracuse daily newspaper has apologized for publishing an editorial cartoon that Bishop Frank Harrison of Syracuse called "scurrilous and vicious comment" on Catholic teaching about the Blessed Virgin.

The cartoon, penned by syndicated cartoonist Patrick Oliphant, appeared in the March 14 edition of *The Post-Standard* newspaper and dealt with the March 10 Vatican document on procreation.

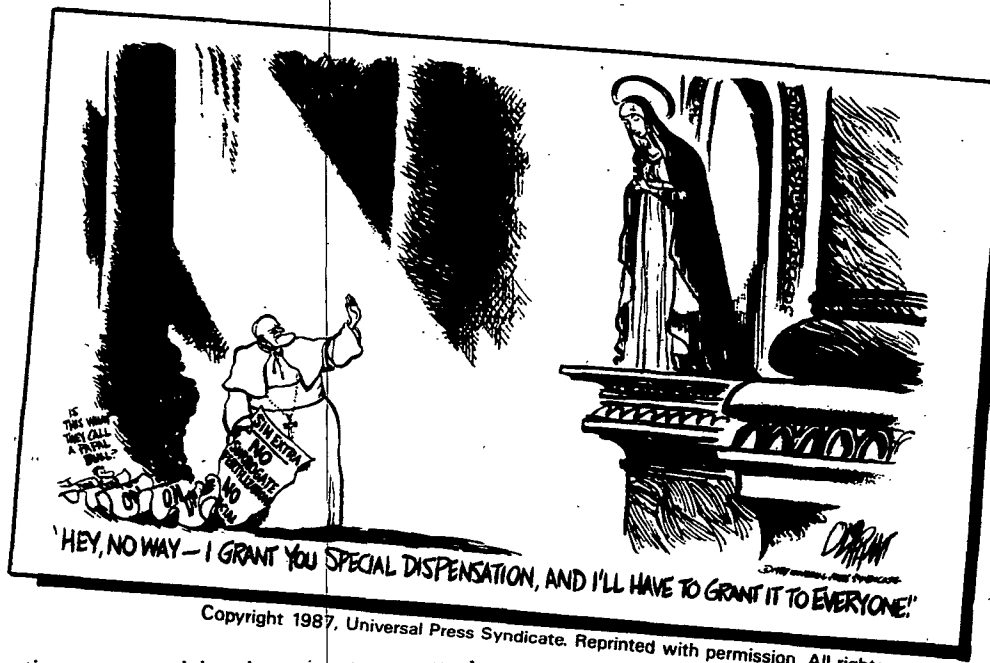
The cartoon accompanied an editorial in which the newspaper criticized the Vatican's procreation document.

In a March 16 letter to *Post-Standard* executive editor Robert Atkinson, Bishop Harrison demanded a published apology for the cartoon.

"We apologize to those who interpreted our cartoon last Saturday as an attack on Catholicism. We made a mistake," *The Post-Standard* said in a "letter to our readers" March 17.

"We were told that the cartoon crossed the line from an honest argument over the separation of church and state into a direct attack on Catholicism. That was not our intention," the newspaper said.

In apologizing, the newspaper judged itself "guilty of insensitivity," but said it would continue to criticize Church pronouncements. It said that the intent of the March 14 editorial was "to debate the fertility instruc-



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tions as a civics issue, not to attack Catholicism."

Bishop Harrison, who did not mention the editorial in his demand for an apology, said in his letter that Catholics believe that the Blessed Virgin "holds a unique and special place in the relationship between God and

humankind." To ridicule that belief is "inexcusable," he said, and "enforces our concern that the Catholic Church is fair game for your satire."

Catholics "understand that the moral

teachings of our Church are subject to discussion and debate in the present U.S. political climate," he said. "We expect that, and welcome it" so long as religious beliefs are treated with respect, he said.

"Debate the issues with us, but we insist on our faith being regarded with dignity and respect at both the institutional and personal levels," he said.

Lee Salem, United Press Syndicate's editorial director, said March 20 that — of the 500 Oliphant subscribers — he had heard complaints about the Oliphant cartoon only from Syracuse. The incident marked at least the third time in less than a year that Oliphant cartoons have been criticized by Catholics.

Last July a group of Catholics in Rochester, demonstrated at the Democrat and Chronicle offices, to object to an Oliphant cartoon that depicted a menacing pope telling Catholics in Colombia, where Pope John Paul had just visited, to stop using birth control and "get that population up!"

Last September, Bishop James Timlin of Scranton, Pa., received an apology from *The Tribune* daily newspaper in Scranton after it published an Oliphant cartoon that listed issues of U.S.-Vatican tension, such as abortion and birth control, and quoted the pope as ordering Americans to "throw down your liberal catechisms and ecumenical propaganda and genuflect on out here..."

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