

Archbishop terms practical dissent 'a pastoral issue'

By Jerry Filteau

Los Angeles (NC) — Despite strong words condemning dissent from Church moral teachings, Pope John Paul II "is not saying that those who do not accept all the teaching are out of the Church," Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati told a packed press conference Sept. 16.

At an all-morning session with the nation's Catholic bishops the pope said it is a "grave error" to think one can be a "good Catholic" and yet follow Church moral teachings only selectively.

Archbishop Pilarczyk, vice president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, met with journalists after the closed-door meeting.

"For one who realizes the full import of a Church teaching ... and chooses freely and knowingly to disregard that," the pope is saying that this presents a real problem for that person, Archbishop Pilarczyk said.

"The Holy Father, I think, wants to be very careful to underline the fact that Catholic teaching is not a kind of grocery store where Catholics are free to take what they want and not take what they want," he said.

Several reporters asked what were the implications for people like married couples practicing artificial birth control when the pope said that practical dissent from Church teaching can pose an "obstacle to reception of the sacraments."

The archbishop repeatedly stressed that the issue was a pastoral one, and it would have to be answered in each case individually.

Such questions must deal with the state of conscience of the persons involved and solved in a confessional or counseling situation, and they cannot be answered in the abstract, he said.

The pope spoke in a "straightforward, unambiguous way" to the bishops, he explained, but was not telling bishops "to go home and raise Cain" with Catholics who disobey or disagree with some Church teachings.

He also denied suggestions from some reporters that the pope was showing displeasure with American Catholics or the U.S. bishops with his remarks.

"I don't think the tone of that interpreta-

tion is correct. I don't think he is displeased with our country," he said.

There is "a gap" between the U.S. Church and Rome in the sense that "in every country, the Church has a different flavor, its own culture, its own mindset ... That's what being a Church incarnate means.

"But we are not dealing with a big face-off here."

Archbishop Pilarczyk described the meeting as "very cordial, very warm" and "a very moving experience" for himself and the other bishops.

Asked if he was not concerned about Catholics leaving the Church over some of its teachings, he said, "Of course I am concerned — but the fact that I am concerned does not mean that I will change Church teaching to keep them coming."

The pope's message on dissent, he said, was that "you cannot in good conscience pick and choose and then sit back and say everything is the same as before."

Summarizing in broadest terms the pope's comments on whether one can dissent and be

a good Catholic, the archbishop said, "Is it OK to dissent from non-infallible Church teaching? No, it's not OK. If I dissent, am I therefore out of the Church? I don't think the pope said that."

When asked if the pope was calling on bishops to assert their authority more despite warnings from them that an authoritarian approach does not work well in America, he said, "I did not hear the Holy Father saying, 'I don't care what you guys think, here it is — bingo.' That's not what I heard him saying."

To a suggestion that the pope was calling for a "more conservative, more controlling" approach from the bishops, he said, "I don't think so." The pope said that unpopular Church teachings must still be taught, he said, but "the Church has always taught unpopular truths."

In that regard the pope was not asking bishops to teach something they were not already teaching, he said. "I believe that all the American bishops believe and teach what the American Church teaches."

Theologians react for, against papal views on dissent

Washington (NC) — One theologian said that Pope John Paul II is "wrong" in interpreting Church teaching on dissent, but others said they welcome and agree with the papal talk to the U.S. bishops in Los Angeles Sept. 16.

In his wide-ranging talk to the bishops Pope John Paul made two key references to dissent, one on practical dissent and one on theological or intellectual dissent.

"It is sometimes claimed that dissent from the magisterium (Church teaching authority) is totally compatible with being a 'good Catholic' and poses no obstacle to the reception of the sacraments," the pope said. "This is a grave error."

Discussing theological freedom he said that bishops should "seek to show the inacceptability of dissent and confrontation as a policy and method in the area of Church teaching."

Father Richard McBrien, dean of the theology department of the University of Notre Dame, said, "If the pope is saying in

his talk that dissent from any kind of official Church teaching is unacceptable, then the pope himself is wrong. Otherwise we could never explain doctrinal development in the Church."

But Norbertine Father Alfred McBride, a member of the papal visit team who developed a set of catechetical and discussion materials for U.S. Catholics preparing for the trip, said in an interview that the pope was not ruling out all theological dissent and doctrinal development, but only certain styles of dissent.

Father McBrien described the pope's speech as highly political, in the sense of in-Church politics, and a "very selective critique" of the issues confronting the U.S. Church today.

He noted that the pope had condemned selective dissent from Church teaching on the issues of abortion and conjugal and sexual morality, but not the dissent of those who oppose Church social teachings.

"Is sex the only area people can't act out their dissent?" he asked.

Msgr. William B. Smith, a theologian at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York, saw an important distinction in the practical vs. intellectual dissent discussion. He said in a

Asked about the likely impact of the pope's reaffirmation during the meeting that women are not to be ordained priests, the Cincinnati prelate responded, "I'm not sure what the result of the pope's statement about women in the Church will be. I think it's unrealistic and probably theologically unsound to expect that the pope is going to say, 'Well, in view of all the problems you have (on that issue), we'll start ordaining women next year.'"

He said the pope "was careful to point out" that women have an important role in the Church even though they cannot be priests.

He declined comment on what impact the pope's statements about theological dissent might have on the case of Father Charles Curran, a theologian at The Catholic University of America. The university's board of trustees is expected to make a final decision this fall on whether Father Curran must be removed from the university's theology faculty because the Vatican has declared him ineligible to teach Catholic theology.

telephone interview that the pope is saying that it is one thing to discuss dissenting views and another to practice dissent "pastorally, by telling people they can receive Communion even though they are living in adultery."

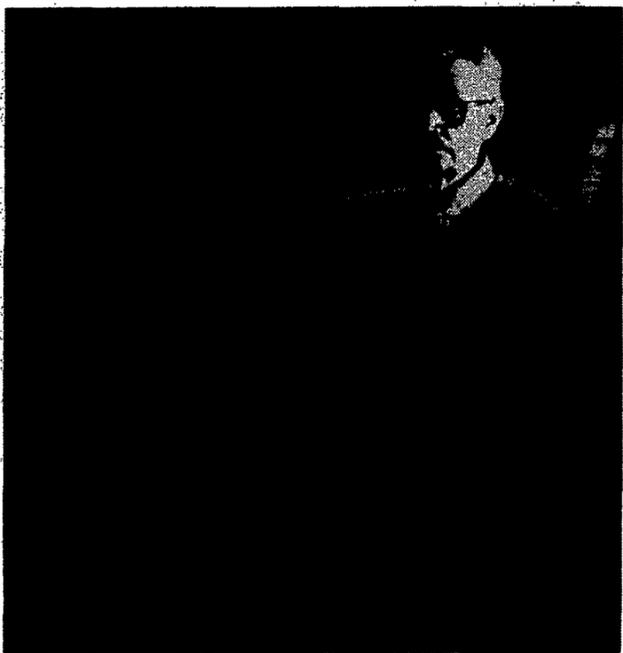
Monsignor Smith said the pope was responding to the central questions the media has "been pounding away at for the last two weeks about 'selective' Catholicism or 'cafeteria' Catholicism or whatever catch term you want to call it."

The New York priest called the pope's remarks "accurate and needed."

Father McBride said the pope's words were addressed to the general level, and left room for standard pastoral decisions about good conscience on the level of the individual case.

In Father McBrien's view, the words of the papal text did not leave room for that interpretation, even if the pope had intended to allow for it. If Catholics took the pope literally as saying dissent on things like artificial birth control is an obstacle to receiving the sacraments, Father McBrien observed, "all our Sunday Masses would be 10 minutes shorter" for lack of communications.

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