

Pope asks laity to be greater 'sign of contradiction'

By Agostino Bono
San Francisco (NC) — The Catholic laity must be a greater "sign of contradiction" challenging the widespread secularism, relativism, consumerism and hedonism of U.S. society, said Pope John Paul II.

In a harsh criticism of U.S. society, he said these present "new challenges and new temptations" to American Catholics as they engage in their primary Church role of infusing Christian values into the world around them.

Other points made by the pope at the Sept. 18 San Francisco meeting with lay leaders included:

- Encouraging pastoral programs for divorced and separated Catholics, but reaffirming Church practice of not admitting divorced Catholics who have remarried outside the Church to Communion, although he invited them to attend Mass.

- Praising lay participation in Church ministries but warning not to let this blur the distinction between laity and priests.

- Reaffirming Church teaching that every conjugal act "must always be open to bringing forth new life."

- Telling lay people to root their activities in a strong spiritual life based on regular Mass attendance.

The pope also said "the access of women to public functions must be ensured" because of the equal dignity of men and women. But he did not discuss the issue of ordaining women.

The pope praised "those separated and divorced Catholics who, despite their loneliness and pain, are striving to preserve their fidelity."

"The Church assures them not only of her prayers and spiritual nourishment, but also of her love, pastoral concern and practical help," he added.

"The Church reaffirms her practice of not admitting to eucharistic Communion those

divorced persons who have remarried outside the Church; nevertheless, she assures these Catholics too of her deep love," he said.

The Church encourages them "to attend the eucharistic sacrifice" in the hopes that they will "undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage," the pope added.

The pope also said the laity should take the lead in challenging what he described as an increasingly secularized, materialistic and morally relativistic society.

"All the Catholic laity are called to live the Beatitudes, to become leaven, salt and light for the world, and sometimes 'sign of contradiction' that challenges and transforms that world according to the mind of Christ," he said.

Prior to his speech, the pope heard Donna Hanson, chairwoman of the U.S. bishops' advisory council on the laity, ask for greater acceptance of lay ministry.

"Lay ministers are involved as never before, but acceptance by both clergy and the people of God has not been fully realized," she said.

"Accustomed as I am to dialogue, consultation and collaboration, I do not feel that I am always heard," she added.

She also asked the Church to "reach out and be more inclusive of women, our inactive clergy, homosexuals, the divorced and all people of color."

Mature questioning rather than dissent puts the American laity "among the best educated and the most highly theologically trained in the world," she said.

"In my cultural experience, questioning is generally not rebellion nor dissent. It is rather a desire to participate and is a sign of both love and maturity," she added.

Pontiff consecrates United States to Virgin Mary

By Laurie Hansen
Los Angeles (NC) — Pope John Paul II entrusted the entire U.S. Church to the Virgin Mary during a Mass at Dodger Stadium Sept. 16.

He made the dedication to Mary during his two-day stay in Los Angeles, the sixth stop of his 10-day trip to the United States. The event's significance was increased by its occurrence during the Marian year, which began in June and will continue through the Feast of the Assumption next Aug. 15.

The pope, listing bishops, priests, members of religious orders, deacons and laity, said at the Dodger Stadium Mass he would entrust to Mary all the "holy people of God."

In particular, he said, "I entrust to you the families of America, in their quest for holiness, in their struggle against sin, in their vocation to be vital cells in the body of

Christ."

The Mass, attended by an estimated 57,000 people, focused on the theme of ethnic diversity.

The pope said he also entrusted to Mary "all the women in the Church and the cause of their true human advancement in the world and their ever fuller participation in the life of the Church, according to the authentic plan of God."

He asked that women discover in Mary the "secret of living totally their femininity in fulfillment, progress and love."

The pope asked Mary's protection for U.S. young people, her care for the elderly and dying, and her strength for single people. "I entrust to you all those engaged in the great Christian struggle of life," the pontiff said, asking special assistance for "those weighed down by the problems of life."

"Console the suffering. Comfort the sad and dejected, those tormented in spirit, those

without families, loved ones or friends," said the pontiff.


He appealed for the poor and needy and those subject to discrimination. "Come to the help of the unemployed. Heal the sick. Aid the handicapped and disabled, so that they may live in a manner befitting their dignity as children of God," he said.

The pope asked for Mary's prayers so that "citizens may work together to conquer evil with good, oppose violence, reject war and its weapons, satisfy hunger, overcome hatred and remedy all forms of personal, social, national and international injustice."

He ended his plea to Mary by asking her to strengthen Catholics in their obedience to the commandments and fidelity to the sacraments.

"Lead (the Church's) children with all their Christian and non-Christian brethren to eternal life," the pope urged.

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Joe Rimkus Jr./NC News
 Armless guitar player Tony Melendez plays a song with his feet during the youth teleconference in Los Angeles. At the song's conclusion, Pope John Paul II came down from the stage and kissed Melendez. A member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Chino, Calif., the 25-year-old musician later described the pope's gesture as "awesome."

Guitarist calls papal kiss 'awesome'

By Kathleen Mitchell
Los Angeles (NC) — For Tony Melendez, the 25-year-old armless guitar player who was hugged and kissed by Pope John Paul II at the youth teleconference in Los Angeles, one word described the papal gesture — "awesome."

"I can't believe it. It was the highlight of my life," he said.

Melendez played his guitar with his feet and sang for Pope John Paul in the emotional climax to the Sept. 15 teleconference. The event linked the pope and 6,000 youth at Universal Studios with youth groups in three other cities.

After the song Pope John Paul broke from the script, jumped down from his stage and approached Melendez on the musician's minstage. The pope reached up and touched Melendez's legs, motioned for the musician to bend down, and then kissed him on the cheek.

Melendez, a member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Chino, Calif., was born in Nicaragua without hands and arms and with a clubfoot. His mother had taken thalidomide, which was commonly prescribed as a sedative until the 1960s, when it was found to cause severe birth deformities when taken during pregnancy.

Melendez told reporters that no words

were spoken during his encounter with Pope John Paul, but the din of the crowd would have drowned out any words anyway, he said.

"I really felt honored. Very, very honored," he said.

At the teleconference Melendez played "Never Be the Same," composed by Ron Griffin, a nationally known Catholic musician who got his start in the Los Angeles area.

Melendez has played the guitar for nine years and has been invited to tour as far as Texas and Washington state. He once appeared on "Real People," a nationally syndicated TV show, and on "Thirty Minutes with Father Michael Manning," a Catholic evangelization program based in Riverside, Calif.

His guitar is tuned to a natural chord, he said, so that his toes need only close over frets to change chords.

Melendez's family moved to the United States when he was a year old, primarily to seek treatment for him, he said. He was fitted with artificial arms and wore them until he was 12 or 14, but discontinued their use out of frustration.

"I could do so much more with my feet," he said, adding that he has even gone skiing.