

## World &amp; Nation

## USCC warns protest may promote upcoming film

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh

Washington (NC) — Much of the protest against Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ," due for release this fall, is inaccurate, said a U.S. Catholic Conference official who viewed a working copy of the movie July 12.

The official, Richard Hirsch, secretary of the U.S. bishops' Department of Communication, commented July 14 as several Christian groups campaigned against the movie, which has been called an "intentional demeaning" of Jesus.

Universal Pictures has defended the movie and said much of what critics have said is "inaccurate and exaggerated."

"In terms of the publicity surrounding the film, a good deal of what has been discussed is inaccurate," said Hirsch, who specifically cited material about the movie circulated by the Rev. Donald E. Wildmon, a Methodist minister spearheading the criticism.

Hirsch said he had "some concern" that well-meaning people — including Catholics — would get "on the bandwagon prematurely" and said such publicity "could promote the film."

He also questioned "whether this film, if reviewed just as any other film, would be a success at the box office" without the pre-publicity from protesters.

Universal said the movie would be released this fall despite objections to the fictional portrayal of Christ's humanity.

The movie is based on a novel, "The Last Temptation of Christ," by Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), and stars Willem Dafoe as Jesus.

Others in the film include Harvey Keitel as Judas, David Bowie as Pontius Pilate, Barbara Hershey as Mary Magdalene and Verna Bloom as Mary.

Kazantzakis' book, written toward the end of his life, presents Jesus as struggling with his humanity before reluctantly accepting his role as Messiah.

Catholic officials at the July 12 screening for religious leaders included Hirsch; Bishop Anthony G. Bosco of Greensburg, Pa., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Communication; and Henry Herx, who reviews films for the communications office.

Morality in Media, founded 26 years ago by Jesuit Father Morton Hill, had two of its staff members at the screening and said in a statement that the movie was an "intentional demeaning of Christ."

The group said the movie portrays Christ as a "colossal wimp" and said the production shows the "distorted thinking of anyone who had anything to do with the film."

Universal in a July 12 statement said

Scorsese "deeply believes that this film is a religious affirmation of faith."

The studio accused critics of wanting censorship and said it hoped the American public "will give the film and filmmaker a fair chance."

Rev. Wildmon, a Methodist minister and founder of the National Federation for Decency, now called the American Family Association, said after reading a script that the production is "the most perverted, distorted account of the historical and biblical Jesus I have ever read." He was invited to the screening but did not attend.

The minister has urged supporters to call Universal, boycott local theaters which show the film, and boycott all subsidiaries of MCA, Universal's parent company, which has publishing and record divisions.

A petition circulated by Rev. Wildmon's group described several scenes, including one it said "has Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene and allowing his guardian angel to watch while Jesus and Magdalene engage in sex."

Hirsch declined to offer an opinion on the still uncompleted film but said key controversial scenes related to Jesus having sex with Mary Magdalene are part of a dream sequence as Jesus undergoes his last temptation on the cross.

Joseph Reilly, national director of

Morality in Media, said in a telephone interview that his staff reported that the film showed "sex between Jesus and Mary Magdalene," but "at a distance" and also presented Jesus as having "fathered children by Mary and Martha."

Rev. Wildmon launched the protests after backing away from a deal with Universal to withhold criticism until after screening the movie. He withdrew from the agreement when the movie was not ready for screening far enough in advance of its release sometime this fall, and accused the studio of using Christian leaders "to delay any protests."

According to an article on Kazantzakis in the Catholic Encyclopedia, the author's life was marked by a tortured spiritual quest to find God.

"The Last Temptation of Christ," which was translated into English in 1960, and a second work by him on St. Francis, "mark the author's harking back to Christianity, not to discover its divine meaning and importance, but rather to seize upon its human aspects," the encyclopedia said.

Scorsese was raised in an Italian-American family, attended Catholic schools in New York and entered the seminary for a year when he was 14. He often uses church imagery in his movies.

## Bishops decry new tensions in Nicaragua

The Latin American Bishops' Council protested the closing of a Nicaraguan Catholic radio station and a U.S. Catholic bishop protested U.S. policy toward Nicaragua during a flare-up of tensions which prompted pessimism over the chances for peace in one of Central America's most troubled nations.

The Latin American bishops urged Nicaragua to "reconsider" the closing of Radio Catolica and the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*.

The Nicaraguan government closed the Managua archdiocesan radio station July 11 in its second crackdown on opposition media since agreeing to democratic reforms last year in a Central American peace pact.

A few days earlier, in Boston, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton of Detroit led a "tea party" to protest the U.S. embargo against Nicaragua.

In a July 13 message to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, the bishops' council, known by its Spanish initials as CELAM, raised "energetic protest" to the media closings.

"We respectfully urge the Nicaraguan government to reconsider this measure, which in no way favors the process of national reconciliation," the message said.

The council is the executive agency of 22 Latin American bishops' conferences.

Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua said in an interview with Vatican Radio July 14 that the government crackdown was "inopportune, unjust and inconvenient." He also said talks between the government and the U.S.-backed rebel Nicaraguan Resistance were at an impasse.

The government's action took place in an atmosphere of declining hopes for reconciliation in the country's civil war, Cardinal Obando Bravo told Vatican Radio.

"Without doubt both sides also lack political will," the cardinal added. "The government would like to put an end to the Resistance and, vice versa, the Resistance would like to put an end to the government."

The Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior charged Radio Catolica with "inciting to violence, disorder and lack of respect for constitutional government." The station had reported on an opposition demonstration held the previous day in Nandaime, 40 miles south of Managua. The demonstration was violently broken up by police.

The ministry cited a 1979 press law that requires news media to "provide accurate news in a coherent context" and prohibits reporting that encourages violence.

The same day Radio Catolica was taken off the air, the government ordered the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* closed for 15 days.

The government also ordered U.S. Ambassador Richard Melton and seven other U.S. Embassy officials out of the country, accusing them of sponsoring state terrorism. It said embassy officials were at the demonstration.

Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel



Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton (left) led about 150 people in a "tea party" protest against the Reagan administration's renewed embargo against Nicaragua.

D'Escoto, a suspended Maryknoll priest, charged the Americans with "activities complementary to the state terrorism the administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan is carrying out against Nicaragua."

President Reagan first ordered an economic embargo against Nicaragua in May 1985. It was renewed May 1.

Jesuit Father Cesar Jerez, president of Central American University in Managua, said the future of the regional peace plan depended largely on U.S. reaction to Nicaragua's latest moves.

"The decision of the U.S. administration has been very clear in the last month -- to suffocate the Nicaraguan revolution by

destroying the economy of the country," he said in a July 15 interview in Maryknoll, N.Y.

To protest the U.S. government's policy in Nicaragua, Bishop Gumbleton and about 150 protesters filled crates with copies of Reagan's May embargo renewal order and on July 8, dumped the crates into Boston Harbor at Columbus Park on the downtown waterfront.

"Like the colonists who protested King George's unjust tax on tea, we come here to reject the economic injustice our own government wreaks on the poor in Nicaragua," Bishop Gumbleton said. "It's time to put an end to the economic, as well as the military,

war against Nicaragua."

Bishop Gumbleton, president of Pax Christi USA, called on the U.S. presidential candidates to "renounce the contra war and lift the embargo as the first act of your new administration."

Organizers let the crates soak awhile in the harbor, then pulled them out, saying they did not want to "add" to pollution in the harbor.

"Dump the Embargo" rallies were scheduled July 8 and July 9 in U.S. cities from Montpelier, Vt., to Honolulu. Many of the rallies were billed as "Nicaraguan Coffee Parties," and the embargoed product was sold as a sign of solidarity.

## Students file lawsuit seeking to reinstate Fr. Curran

Cindy Wooden

Washington (NC) — Five former students of Father Charles E. Curran, a suspended professor of moral theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, have filed a lawsuit seeking reinstatement of the priest.

The four doctoral candidates and one graduate student filed their breach of contract suit against the university July 9 in the District of Columbia Superior Court, according to statements from the students.

"The suspension of Rev. Charles Curran violated our contractual rights to study and do research in a climate in which, as promised by the university, 'the only constraint upon truth is truth itself,'" they said.

The students charge that the university

violated their "contractual rights" to academic freedom. The suit does not specify the damages being sought.

Catholic University does not comment on pending litigation, said a university spokeswoman.

Meanwhile, Father Curran told *The Washington Post* that he had accepted the position of visiting professor at the University of Southern California's School of Religion for the 1988-89 school year.

A spokeswoman at the private university in Los Angeles said Father Curran would be teaching a course on human values and another on social ethics.

Father Curran could not be reached for comment. He spent the 1987-88 school year as a visiting professor of Catholic studies at

Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

The Vatican ruled in 1986 that Father Curran, who had taught at Catholic University for more than 20 years, was neither suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic theology because of his dissent from certain church teachings.

The university's board of trustees in April 1988 stripped Father Curran of his church license to teach in the Vatican-accredited theology department, but said a position would be found for him in another department.

In May, Father Curran said he and the university could not agree on an assignment for him, so he continued pressing a 1987 lawsuit asking the Superior Court to enforce his teaching contract.