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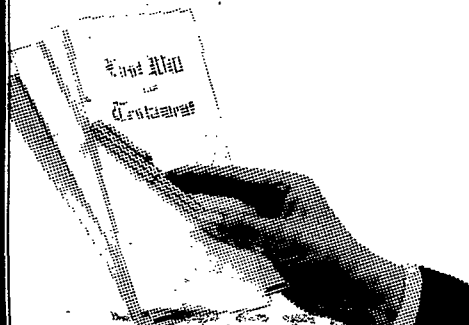
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Columnists

The role of episcopal conferences

By Father Richard P. McBrien

During their June meeting at Collegeville, Minn., the U.S. Catholic bishops devoted an important part of their discussions to the Vatican working paper on episcopal conferences.

Each of the Church's bishops received a copy of the document last winter, along with an invitation to submit reactions. That gesture in itself indicated how much things have changed since the Second Vatican Council.

In the past, when papal and curial documents were circulated, they were already in their final form. The rest of the Church had simply to accept and implement them as promptly and as faithfully as possible. Although the situation is different today, there are still instances where the Vatican continues to operate in the old way. The controversial Vatican document on reproductive technology is a recent case in point.

But this new document on episcopal conferences is being prepared in a collegial manner, and the U.S. bishops are taking seriously their own role in the process. The Collegeville discussions have made clear that among the U.S. bishops there is widespread dissatisfaction with the Vatican document.

The bishops criticized the document's orientation toward conformity, its pre-Vatican II concept of the episcopacy, its unrealistic assessment of episcopal conferences as they exist today, its inadequate understanding of the nature and structure of the Church, and its internal inconsistency and lack of logic.

One archbishop reported that several bishops in his discussion group "would not let a document of this poor quality out of the office." Mind you, these are not the reactions of theologians or of Catholics with an authority hang-up, but of bishops.

No one expressed the general concern about the Vatican document more succinctly than Archbishop John May of St. Louis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. In his opening address to the bishops at their Collegeville meeting, Archbishop May rejected three common objections against episcopal conferences that are also implied in this Vatican draft: that episcopal conferences have no truly theological foundation, but are only "practical contrivances;" that they are not truly collegial; and that they have no mandate to teach.

Regarding the first point, Archbishop May conceded that episcopal conferences are not of

Essays in Theology

divine origin. But neither is the parish, the diocese, or the Roman Curia for that matter. Moreover, to concede that episcopal conferences are not of divine origin is not to say that they are simply a "practical contrivance."

On the contrary, Vatican II explicitly referred to the growth of such conferences as the effect of divine providence (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No. 23), and the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church linked them with the ancient synods, provincial councils, and plenary councils (No. 36).

Regarding the second objection, Archbishop May argued that collegiality is exercised in various ways and at various levels. Its fullest expression occurs when the whole college of bishops teaches together with and under the Bishop of Rome, who is head of the college. But the "long and varied history of the Church has shown that collegiality can express itself genuinely and importantly through local synods, regional groups of bishops and patriarchal units."

Regarding the third objection, the council's Decree on Bishops identifies the pastoral office of bishop as one of teaching, sanctifying and governing. The decree noted that bishops jointly exercise their pastoral office through such agencies as episcopal conferences.

The revised Code of Canon Law bolsters this interpretation, Archbishop May continued. Canon 753 explicitly refers to episcopal conferences as a vehicle of episcopal teaching.

The record corroborates the theory. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops has in fact been making doctrinal pronouncements for at least 20 years. The recent pastoral letters on peace and the economy are only two of many examples.

Archbishop May has appointed a committee of former NCCB presidents to coordinate the drafting of the official conference response to the Vatican draft. One looks forward to the bishops' report and to the final, substantially modified, Vatican document.

Leadership institute set for fall at renewal center

The National Council of Catholic Women is offering its Chautauqua Leadership Institute September 23, 24 and 25, at the Stella Niagara Center for Renewal. The program will begin with a dinner at 6 p.m. on Friday, Sept. 23, and will conclude at 3 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 25.

The institute will highlight three areas in leadership: empowerment, motivation and service. Participants will be trained in such areas as preventing leadership burnout; sizing up different leadership situations and responding to those situations; and making presentations.

Reservation forms can be obtained by contacting Mary Smith, 3514 Michigan Ave., El-

Center needs volunteers

Volunteers are needed for Threshold's Health and Community Outreach Program to develop and work with educational materials, secure donations for client needs and perform basic clerical duties.

The Health and Community Outreach Program works with young people (aged 12-25) and their families in schools and in the community. The program deals with pregnant and parenting teens, AIDS education, personal growth and development, nutrition and more. Volunteer hours are flexible. Call (716)454-7530 for information.

Readiness training course for D/S/W women planned

The GROW Displaced Homemaker Center, a program of the Regional Council on Aging, is offering a free job readiness training course for divorced, separated or widowed women of all ages. The two-week course will begin September 12 and will run through September 23.

Participants will receive assistance in such areas as confidence building, skills assessment, career exploration, resume writing and interviewing skills. Job placement help will follow the two-week program.

mira, 14903, or by calling (607)734-2977. The registration fee of \$155 includes a shared room, meals and a manual. The deadline to register is September 6.

Program on Jesus' journey set for Watson Homestead

Watson Homestead Conference and Retreat Center in Painted Post is working with Auburn Theological Seminary to sponsor a seminar entitled "Jesus' Journey Into God," scheduled October 24, 25, 26 and 27.

The program will feature Walter Wink, a member of the Auburn Seminary teaching staff, and June Keener-Wink, a potter and teacher of body movement.

Through a dialogue approach to the Bible — both in body movement and artistic expression — participants will ponder what Jesus' life journey means to their journeys today. The workshop will offer continuing education units.

Enrollment is limited. Write Watson Homestead, RD 2, Box 168, Painted Post, NY, 14870, for information or an application.

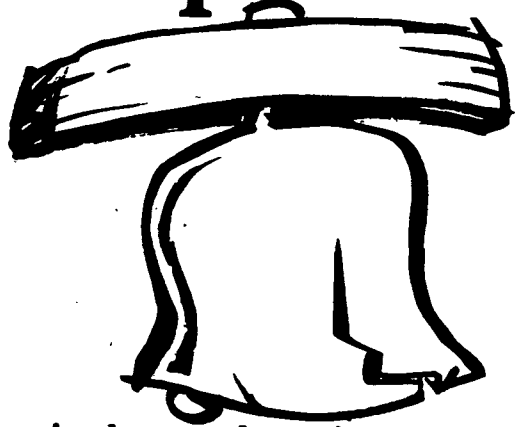
Day care center moves into lower floor of parish school

Sister Clare Francis, SSJ, principal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, announced that the Oregon-Leopold Day Care Center has recently accepted an offer to move into the lower floor of the school. The day care center serves children whose parents are in school or who are looking for a job.

The move was made possible through private funds and assistance from the Monroe County Social Services Office and the United Way.

Those who would like more information about the Oregon-Leopold Day Care Center should call Wayne Spitz at (716)467-6111. Fees are adjusted according to income. OLPH School is located at 1069 Joseph Ave., Rochester.

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