

U.S. bishops, Vatican discuss faith, freedom

By John Thavis
NC News

VATICAN CITY — In one of the most wide-ranging and open discussions ever held at the Vatican, U.S. bishops and Vatican officials spent four days trying to find the best approach to evangelization in a highly secularized U.S. society.

The March 8-11 meeting, presided over almost continually by Pope John Paul II, covered such practical issues as annulment procedures, penance rites and family planning programs.

But the discussion generally gravitated to such topics as tension between the Christian faith and Americans' idea of freedom. On that point, the need for bishops to promote and protect church teachings was repeatedly stressed.

The meeting was first suggested by U.S. bishops several years ago. At their insistence, full texts of all the talks were published, and briefings and other reports described the discussions in detail.

In the end, although "no specific decisions were made, no plans were laid and no structures set up," the bishops felt confirmed in their ministry, according to Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, vice president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.



Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston (left), Cardinal Roger Etcheagaray, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" (center), and Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York talk during an informal moment during the meetings between the U.S. bishops and Vatican officials.

'Candor and kindness'

"The talks were characterized by candor, conviction and kindness. It was not the bad schoolboys coming home to be disciplined by their fathers," Archbishop Pilarczyk said at a Vatican press conference March 11.

Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston said the meeting represented a "very significant" moment in the life of the U.S. church and that he hoped the event would lead to better acceptance of church teachings by U.S. Catholics.

Summing up the meeting in a talk to the 35 bishops and 25 curial participants March 11, the pope said that "difficulties will not be lacking" in bringing Christianity to "every sphere" of American life.

"What is important is that challenges or even opposition to the saving truth which the church professes be met within the context of faith," he said.

Bishops need to be "faithful in handing on what we ourselves have received," the pope said — in their dealings with priests and religious, in catechesis, in encouraging laity to take a proper role in the church's life and in "upholding the values of life and love in marriage and family life."

The pope's remarks touched on a theme that ran through much of the meeting, which began with a discussion on the teaching role of bishops and concluded with suggestions about the best way of reaching the unchurched in the United States.

In between, participants offered assessments of U.S. liturgical and sacramental life, the ecumenical movement, lay Catholic involvement and pastoral programs to help families. Some concern was expressed about religious and priestly vocations, seminary programs and the state of Catholic education in the country.

Bishop as teacher

The keynote topic — the bishop as teacher of the faith — was taken up in talks March 8 by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's chief doctrinal monitor, and Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York. Both suggested that some bishops might have abdicated their teaching role to theologians and professional educators.

The resulting "confusion of voices," Cardinal Ratzinger said, often "drowns out" that of the bishop. Bishops have largely submitted to seeing their role reduced to one of spiritual administrator, he said.

Cardinal O'Connor, while defending U.S. bishops as "articulate and courageous defenders of the faith," agreed that some seem to have been "browbeaten" by theologians and other educators. In the confusion, he said, Catholics came to believe they could "shop around" for viewpoints on such basic issues as birth control.

A bishop "must have the wisdom to distinguish between the essentials of the faith, which may demand definitive intervention on his part, and those matters which may be legitimately argued," said Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, in a summary statement issued at the end of the meeting.

Some bishops also urged clarification of the role of the theologian, a subject of current study by the U.S. bishops' conference, said Cardinal Bernardin, who was a moderator of the meeting.

Conviction and compromise

While Cardinal O'Connor made a strong call for a "countercultural" church in the United States, other bishops noted that U.S. ideals of freedom, plurality and compromise can also make the church stronger.

Archbishop John R. Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis said U.S. bishops explained that they compromise tactically on some matters when a full victory cannot be won — such as in supporting legislation to modify abortion laws.

Afterward, Cardinal Ratzinger said that while he better understood how U.S. bishops view the issue, compromise should not be used "when truth is at stake just to maintain peace."

In remarks at the closing press conference, Cardinal Antonio Innocenti, head of the Congregation for Clergy, said Ameri-



Pausing for prayer, Pope John Paul II opens a meeting between 35 U.S. bishops and Vatican officials March 11 in Rome. The meeting focused on evangelization in a secularized society.

cans "impassioned search for liberty" causes problems when church authority is questioned, but "also offers the great advantage of great freedom for the church, to be able to proclaim the Gospel message with all its consequences."

Summing up the meeting, Cardinal Bernardin said that "we cannot speak of a single American culture. There are multiple layers, some deeply secularized, some of a religious nature."

Participants repeatedly enumerated cultural pressures on the church's efforts, including secularism, consumerism, radical feminism, exaggerated individualism and a "divorce mentality."

While noting these problems are worldwide, Cardinal Innocenti said the Vatican viewed the United States as a "country which precedes many others in both problems and solutions."

The solutions — pastoral programs and approaches adopted by U.S. bishops — were generally praised by the curial officials.

Specific differences

As discussion moved to specific points, differences between the Vatican and U.S. representatives arose:

- On use of the Tridentine Mass, Cardinal Eduardo Martinez Somalo, head of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, urged that the permission bishops have for allowing the old rite's use be given a "generous and broad" application locally.

The Americans replied that some groups are using the rite, replaced after the Second Vatican Council, to "turn back the clock" and undermine the authority of local bishops.

In discussing penance, Cardinal Martinez Somalo raised a frequent Vatican caution against overuse of general absolution.

Archbishop Daniel Kucera of Dubuque, Iowa, said that despite "vocal and inaccurate claims to the contrary," general absolution is used "sparingly" in the United States.

According to Cardinal Bernardin's summary report, Vatican officials vetoed limited experiments with general absolution aimed at encouraging returns to individual confession.

- On another sacramental issue, a U.S. suggestion to devise a special rite of penance for children was turned down because it was feared that transition to the regular rite could be "problematic," Cardinal Bernardin said.

Concern about vocations

- "Radical feminism" was cited in a number of talks as negatively affecting the church in such areas as religious life, vocations and family values. Cardinal Bernardin reported participants saw "an urgent need for a sound philosophical theological critique of this type of feminism."

Cardinal Innocenti, speaking at the press conference, said the desire of women to be priests sometimes seemed based more on "a search for power than service."

Cardinal Law said, however, that "it's very difficult to read people's motivations" and that for many women "the drive can be service."

- U.S. Cardinal William W. Baum, head of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, stressed "positive thinking" in the vocations crisis.

"A positive approach to vocations must shrug off the pressures to mute the priesthood that come from people who want women priests, married priests, part-time priests, or simply optional celibacy," he said.

"We must also be careful in interpreting the decline in vocations to the priesthood as 'providentially' enabling other ministries to develop in the church," he added.

Cardinal Baum said more attention should be paid to philosophy, personal prayer, teaching the value of celibacy, and correcting a "theological thinness" in seminary programs.

On the same topic, Archbishop Pilarczyk said seminary programs have generally improved. He also said the drop in U.S. vocations raised a number of complex questions, such as whether a large number of vocations is "an unequivocal sign of the health of the church" and whether "the decline in the number of priests (is) an indication of decay or a call to modify the way in which we minister to people."

- While Catholic schools have been a major reason for U.S. church vitality, room for improvement exists in areas of Catholic identity and formation of lay teachers, Cardinal Baum said. He said many people wonder whether church-run colleges and universities are as "Catholic" as they once were.

Archbishop Eugene A. Marino of Atlanta said U.S. Catholic schools are "committed to teaching the Catholic faith and its values" and added "they have survived and continue to thrive" in a highly competitive environment.

Debate over annulments

- The issue of marriage tribunals was raised in an unscheduled speech by Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, head of the Vatican's highest court, who questioned why most annulments granted in the world are in the United States. He said it could be deduced that U.S. tribunals were not following proper procedures.

Those comments drew strong defense of the tribunals from the Americans, including Detroit Cardinal Edmund C. Szoka, who said the Vatican seemed more concerned about "numbers" than procedure and invited Vatican officials to the United States for a firsthand look at the tribunals.

Archbishop Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles and other bishops also noted that U.S. annulment figures are not so high when considered against the total number of requests.

- U.S. religious life was described as in "crisis." Participants suggested that bishops be open to new forms of consecrated life and keep close personal contacts with religious orders in their dioceses.

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