

# Vatican officials call U.S. meeting a success

VATICAN CITY (NC) — Three top Vatican officials said a recent meeting of U.S. bishops and Curia leaders was an unprecedented success that revealed remarkable unity on the need for bishops to defend church doctrine.

The meeting should help put an end to talk of division between the U.S. and Vatican hierarchies, the officials said in separate interviews March 16-17, a week after the four-day session at the Vatican.

They said follow-up to the meeting could come in a wide range of pastoral steps.

Doctrinal "confusion" among U.S. Catholics was a major concern addressed at the meeting, the officials said, noting that bishops will find a tool toward resolving this confusion in the universal catechism currently under preparation. The catechism will be a compendium that will be "normative" for all other Catholic teaching aids, said Cardinal William W. Baum, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education.

On the topic of marriage tribunals, which elicited the most lively debate during the meeting, Cardinal Edouard Gagnon, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, said the U.S. bishops may have convinced the Curia that annulments are not so easy to obtain in the United States, but now must emphasize the same point to their faithful.

Cardinal Gagnon said the debate about marriage tribunals was useful from the Curia's point of view. U.S. bishops, responding to statistics showing a relatively high number of annulments granted in the United States, argued that many other requests are screened out before they reach the level of the tribunal process.

Cardinal Gagnon suggested that the bishops undertake "a certain public relations work" on this point in their own dioceses.

"There was an explanation of numbers,

and this is very important. But I think this needs to be publicized, so that young people don't think it's easy to get an annulment," Cardinal Gagnon said.

Cardinal Gagnon also defended his remarks about the risks of women working in diocesan tribunals. In a speech during the meeting, Cardinal Gagnon cautioned that while women religious can be helpful in dealing with marriage cases, "we have to be careful that their tender hearts do not play tricks on them." His remarks were later criticized by some U.S. bishops.

In the interview, Cardinal Gagnon insisted that his remarks were not sexist but merely accurate.

"We have hundreds of cases of tribunals run by nuns, and they give declarations of nullity as soon as a woman cries in their presence," he said.

Another main theme of the meeting was the need for church educators to get "back to the basics" of the faith, a job in which they will be aided by the universal catechism.

It "will not take the place of other catechisms or publications, but it will be there as an indispensable point of reference," and "the doctrinal content of catechisms and other aids or publications must be in harmony with this compendium of Catholic doctrine," said Cardinal Baum, a member of the commission preparing the catechism.

The cardinal said he hoped the catechism would help restore a "common language" on doctrinal points — a language that has been weakened or lost, in part because dissatisfaction with earlier manuals led catechists to take a "different approach."

During the meeting, participants also voiced concern about the Catholic identity of church-run schools and spoke about the need to stress Catholic principles in curriculums.

Cardinal Baum said all this should be

closely tracked by the local bishop, who should familiarize himself with the school and perhaps make curriculum suggestions and point out deficiencies. In his view, Cardinal Baum added, "universities and colleges should not read that as interference."

Because many college-level students do not know the basics about Catholic doctrine, administrators and professors also need to face the fact that they will have to teach these things as part of the "remedy," the cardinal said.

A recent Vatican visitation found that U.S. seminaries are basically "functioning well," Cardinal Baum said. But it also discovered gaps in the philosophy content of some programs — reflecting the overall "battering" the study of philosophy has taken during the last 25 years. In this area, the cardinal said, the meeting found "need of collaboration" between the education congregation and the U.S. bishops' conference as a follow-up to the visitation.

Cardinal Baum said the meeting did another service in focusing on the difference between the "discerning" function of the bishop and the more exploratory role of the theologian. In the popular mind, he said, this distinction has been somewhat lost.

"Some people have perhaps forgotten this crucial difference: that the bishop is the judge, the one who makes the authoritative decision about what is or is not in harmony with Catholic doctrine," he said.

"Occasionally we see theological works which present themselves as authoritative sources of doctrine," he added. In publishing their works, he said, theologians "must always keep in mind the distinction of roles."

Until their work has been analyzed and discussed, theologians should "refrain from presenting their thoughts as acceptable courses of action that can be safely followed," he said.

Cardinal Baum said he did not think U.S. bishops as a body had been remiss in making this distinction clear.

In an interview published in the Italian Catholic newspaper *Avvenire*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's top doctrinal expert, also focused on an "imbalance" between bishops and theologians, which is creating serious problems for the universal church.

During the meeting, Cardinal Ratzinger gave one of the main talks on the bishop as teacher of the faith, warning that theologians and professional educators have largely usurped the bishop's teaching role.

"I wanted to encourage the bishops, on one hand, to have a theology, to promote it, to have a great respect for it, to be open to learning, to study, and on the other hand to carry out their specific role" as messengers of the faith, Cardinal Ratzinger said in the interview.

That means, in part, realigning the "almost falsified" relationship between bishop and theologian, he said. He said his comments on this topic at the meeting were prompted by long-developing trends and by a recent statement by 163 European theologians, who criticized the way Pope John Paul II is using his teaching authority.

The debate on moral theology and on the autonomy of theology is in "full swing," the cardinal said, and represents a "difficult moment" for the church.

Cardinal Ratzinger said the pope, recognizing the problem, has been trying to select new bishops who have a "strong theological base, capable of re-establishing that balance which has been lost" — a balance between the bishop as the voice of the faith and the theologian as one who reflects upon and deepens understanding of the faith.

On the subject of the teaching role of bishops' conferences, which is currently being studied by the Vatican, Cardinal Ratzinger remarked that while a pastoral letter of a large bishops' conference like that of the United States might have "more weight" for the universal church than that of an individual bishop, it should not be exaggerated or seen "as if it were an act of divine right."

## Talks on catechism to begin in fall

VATICAN CITY — A seven-month consultation with the world's Catholic bishops and bishops' conferences will precede the final drafting of a universal catechism, a Vatican statement said.

The consultation will begin Nov. 1 so that the papally appointed catechism commission can provide "a substantial report" to the next Synod of Bishops, planned for fall 1990, the statement said.

Pope John Paul II established the catechism commission in 1986 after the 1985 extraordinary Synod of Bishops recommended the writing of a universal catechism to be used as a basis for the formulation of diocesan and national catechisms. The pope often has expres-

sed hope that the universal catechism will be published in 1990, the 25th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council.

The Vatican said the commission has reviewed the third draft of the catechism and has made suggestions for revisions before the document is submitted to the worldwide hierarchy.

Current plans call for the catechism to have three main sections, the statement said. These will deal with "the doctrinal truths of faith, using the Apostles' Creed as framework, the sacraments and the church's liturgical life, and the moral life and the call to holiness," it said.

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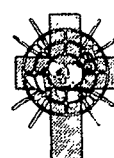
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