

Papal letter mixes praise, criticism of U.S. religious

By Jerry Filteau
NC News

WASHINGTON — In a letter to the U.S. bishops, Pope John Paul II mixed words of praise for U.S. religious with sharp criticisms of "radical feminism and polarization" and other aspects of religious life in the United States.

In the letter, released in Washington March 29, the pope blamed lack of new vocations partly on a failure of religious to live up to their calling and identity.

"A continual state of flux ... an excessive self-absorption and introspection, an overemphasis on the needs of the members as opposed to the needs of God's people are often stumbling blocks" to potential vocations, he said.

The papal letter, 11 pages long, reflected on the results of a study of religious life begun by the U.S. bishops in 1983 under a special papal commission headed by Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco.

The pope stressed the primacy of consecrated life and community life for religious, warning that "in many instances the apostolate or ministry seems to have eclipsed the other values."

He called for an end to the "polarization" among women religious, urging them to "speak to one another" and "remove the causes of their division."

At the same time he reaffirmed the status of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious — a focal point of complaints by more conservative women's orders — as the official organization established by the Holy See to coordinate relations with the Vatican and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

He said that other associations of religious can legitimately be formed, but these "are distinct from" the LCWR and the parallel men's group, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

In recent years, women superiors who have refused to participate in the LCWR have lobbied to end LCWR's exclusive representation of women superiors on joint commissions of the CMSM, LCWR and NCCB.

Pope John Paul also criticized U.S. religious for inadequate structures and exercise of authority within some orders. He acknowledged that "a rigid and autocratic style of government" sometimes found in the past had to be corrected, but said this could not be done "by destroying authority."

"The substitution of a management model of authority for a government model is not the answer," he said. He warned against "a loss of personal authority or an unwillingness to use it." Lack of authority in religious life, he said, "leads to a self-direction and autonomy which are incompatible with being identified with Jesus, who came to do the will of the Father."

In his comments on feminism, the pope told the bishops, "I concur with you in supporting and promoting the rights and dignity of women. ... However, a radical feminism which seeks the rights of women by attacking and denying fundamental, clear and constant moral teaching does not reflect or promote the full reality and true dignity of women."

The pope urged the bishops to continue meeting and talking with religious in their dioceses, as they have been doing under the guidance of the Quinn commission.

"In your role as bishops you have the responsibility to teach all your people, including men and women religious," he said. "Related to that teaching office is the need and obligation to present a sound theological exposition of religious life."

In their local and national discussions with religious and among themselves, the

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Franciscan Father Vincent Cvitkovic, pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Ambbridge, Pa., reports that the opened eyes of Jesus on a crucifix in the church closed on Good Friday. A close-up of the crucifix shows the face of Jesus with closed eyes.

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