

Doctrinal prefect finds risks in vague authority

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ROME — In a late-July newspaper interview, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's top doctrinal official, said bishops' conferences could interfere with the governing of individual dioceses.

Although the conferences have some "legislative competence," Cardinal Ratzinger said he feared that "anonymous and collective government could substitute the personal responsibility of bishops" and "fragment the spiritual identity of the universal church."

The cardinal, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made the comments in an interview published July 30 by the Rome newspaper *Il Messaggero*.

The status and authority of bishops' conferences is under study by the doctrinal congregation and other Vatican departments. In 1988, a first draft of a Vatican document outlining limits of the role of such conferences was sharply criticized by bishops in the United States and elsewhere.

"A certain legislative competence of bishops' conferences does exist and corresponds to the true diversity of situations," Cardinal Ratzinger was quoted as saying in the interview.

"The real problem is deeper. The bureaucratic organization of bishops' confer-

ences could damage the freedom of the bishop in governing his diocese, as well as the free development of decisions during assemblies of bishops," he said.

The cardinal expressed apprehension that the "anonymous power" of conferences could "fragment the spiritual identity of the universal church and create particular identities that are sometimes opposed to each other."

In more general remarks, Cardinal Ratzinger said "authority in the church is in crisis" because the concept of authority is under attack. The trend in the church, he said, reflects a "mistaken egalitarianism" found in modern society.

As part of the solution, he suggested that "authorities themselves need to re-learn to be authorities." That means church leaders should make clear that the person in authority is not simply exercising his will, "but is obeying the Lord's will," he said.

Commenting on groups of theologians who have recently challenged the Vatican, the cardinal said the protests involve complicated issues dealing with the church's teaching authority, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and the role of the individual conscience. But he said that in places such as his native West Germany, the protests also reveal a desire to "reject



Bishop Daniel P. Reilly of Norwich, Conn., blesses fishing boats during the 35th annual blessing of the fleet in Stonington Harbor.

Rome" and to stake out an independent position.

On other topics, Cardinal Ratzinger said:

- The "drastic requests" coming from excommunicated Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's Priestly Society of St. Pius X indicates there is no chance the Vatican can bring it back into the fold.

He said the breakaway society is still pressing for negotiations but only on its own narrow terms. Efforts to integrate the self-styled "traditionalist" group were broken off when Archbishop Lefebvre ordained four other bishops and was excommunicated in 1988.

"I cannot see, at the moment, any possi-

bility that the situation can be healed. The circle has closed back on itself, and Archbishop Lefebvre's followers have taken refuge in a type of 'fanaticism of the chosen,'" Cardinal Ratzinger said.

He said he hoped that a dialogue would eventually be possible with "new generations" of the rebel society.

- "As far as AIDS is concerned, whoever dares to say that humanity must free itself from the confused sexual libertinism that makes the disease communicable is exiled from public opinion and is considered irredeemably unenlightened."

- The cardinal also speculated that the use of drugs is another reflection of a "world that does not believe, but that cannot free itself from the attraction of paradise."

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