

Theology document proposes 'weeding out' errors

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — A newly released document on Catholic theology strongly supports traditional teachings and prescribes a continual weeding out of heresy and other theological errors.

The document, published by the International Theological Commission, proposed that future statements that have a teaching function — whether issued by the pope, bishops or Vatican officials — should indicate to what degree they are binding.

Titled "On The Interpretation of Dogmas," the 50-page document was published in late April after several years of preparation, under the authority of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's top doctrinal official and head of the theological commission. It appeared in the Jesuit biweekly magazine, *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

The document said it was responding to a modern "crisis" caused by the widespread rejection of traditional truths and values. This rejection represents "one of the most fundamental spiritual challenges" of our age, it said.

The document also said that interpreting Catholic dogma — the church's fundamental, revealed truths — is a crucial aspect of inculturation such in places as Africa and Asia, where more than a "mere translation" is required.

The bulk of the document, which was written for experts, examined the evolution of dogmatic interpretation and study, especially its relation to Scripture and the magisterium, the church's teaching office.

The obedience Catholics owe the magisterium, it said, is not limited to formally defined truths. The faithful must also give "religiously grounded obedience" to other pronouncements made by a pope, bishops and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, when these statements have a teaching intention.

"It would be especially desirable that the church's magisterium — in order not to expend its authority unnecessarily — indicate clearly in individual instances the varying forms and degrees of binding force of its pronouncements," it said.

In modern pluralistic society, the church's teaching office increasingly uses persuasive argumentation to make its points, the document noted. Thus it should be prepared for "collaboration involving argument" before issuing definitive decisions, it said. The document, citing the pace of modern scientific research, said the magisterium should avoid "premature de-

terminations" in favor of decisions that offer direction.

Generally, the magisterium should provide "orientation and certainty for individual Christians faced with a baffling babel of voices and never-ending theological disputes," it said.

This can be done through a variety of means, ranging from preaching to formal expressions of infallible teaching, it said. When Christian teaching is judged as seriously ambiguous or incompatible with the faith, the church has the duty to eliminate the error — as last resort, by formally rejecting it as heresy, it said.

The document stressed that, in the larger sense, interpreting dogma was a function of the whole church, not just its teaching office. It takes place "in preaching and catechesis, in the celebration of liturgy, in the life of prayer, in diaconal service, in the daily witness given by Christians as well as in the church's juridical-disciplinary order," it said.

Catholic dogma "should not be a dead relic from times past; rather it should become fruitful in the life of the church," the document said. Likewise, it said, church tradition must not be transmitted in a "petrified" state but as stimulus for hope.

The document said that for many Christians today "the traditional dogmatic language of the church just no longer seems to be intelligible" and that some consider it an "obstacle" to the transmission of the faith. This can be a special problem in Africa and Asia when faced with dogmas that were elaborated in a Western culture; it said.

The document said that images and concepts of church dogma are not "arbitrarily interchangeable," however, and in some cases — such as the proclamation of faith — the language itself is the "incarnation of a truth," it said.



AP/Wide World Photos
HUMANE PROTEST — Animal rights activist Cam McQueen is grabbed by police as she and others demonstrate against the use of animals for medical research at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., April 24. Twenty-seven people were arrested during the demonstration, organized by several animal rights groups.

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