

Bishops will discuss key themes at synod

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — More than 200 bishops plan to spend a month at the Vatican discussing themes that mirror their ecclesial lives: vocations, seminary training and ongoing priestly formation.

The talks will take place at the 1990 Synod of Bishops, starting Sept. 30.

Specific topics include how to reinforce commitment to celibacy and ways of handling on-the-job stress that leads to "burnout" and demoralization in many of the world's more than 400,000 priests.

Also likely for debate are post-Second Vatican Council experiments that involve sending seminarians to Catholic universities for some of their courses while they live at special residences, where they receive spiritual formation.

The topic of the synod is "The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day."

The aim is to present Pope John Paul II with recommendations for strengthening formation programs. The synod is limited to advising the pope. It is not empowered to make policy.

The synod's purpose is to reassess formation programs in light of the renewal begun by Vatican II, given the changing circumstances in the complex and varied societies in which the Catholic Church operates.

The synod working paper — prepared after tapping the views of the world hierarchy — says that secular influences and splits within the Catholic community over Vatican II reforms have led to confusion over the role of the priest in church and society.

Not open for debate, according to the pope, is the requirement of celibacy for Latin-rite priests. In pre-synod talks, the pope has made clear that he wants celibacy discussed only in the context of strengthening it in seminary programs and in the lives of priests.

Eastern rites allow married priests, but the marriage must take place before the seminarian is ordained a deacon. Eastern-rite bishops, however, are chosen from the celibate clergy.

Several weeks before the start of the synod, the pope cited Vatican II's reaffirmation of Latin-rite priestly celibacy. He quoted the council's "Decree on Priestly Formation," which says that Latin-rite seminarians "should be very carefully trained" for celibacy.

Seminarians "must be reinforced in their conviction that celibacy is essentially a greater love toward Christ and neighbor," the pope said.

Discussions are expected to include ways of developing formation programs that incorporate the theology of celibacy with psychological and sexual education to help present and future priests cope with the temptations in contemporary societies.

Debates are also likely to include ways of helping seminarians and priests overcome homosexual tendencies.

Vatican officials hope the common thread uniting the specific themes is the need to deepen the spiritual lives of seminarians and priests. This is seen as the core element in defining a priest's identity as someone with the power to offer the sacraments instituted by Christ.

A priest's spiritual life "takes precedence over every other aspect" and must be the primary focus of formation, says the working document. It sees a firm spiritual life as the anchor of a priest's identity and as the motivating force for his other activities, such as promoting social causes.

The need to stiffen spiritual life in seminarians is at the heart of hierarchical differences over programs for sending seminarians to a Catholic university or theological faculty for some of their courses rather than having the entire training within the seminary.

"The progressive secularization of the university environment renders it always less suitable as a place and scene of priestly formation," said Belgian Archbishop Jan Schotte, synod general secretary.

The archbishop is the person primarily responsible for analyzing the views submitted by bishops in preparation for the synod.

But for some bishops with limited funds and professors, sending seminarians to a university "offers convincing advantages or is the only possibility in the local situation," he said.

"Others express serious perplexity about the appropriateness of entrusting an aspect of formation to external institutions," the archbishop said.

The synod occurs at a time when the priestly vocations picture has started to improve. After several post-Vatican II decades of significant declines in the number of priests, the clergy is starting to hold its own again.

The number of major seminarians worldwide is also growing. This gives hope that the figures for priests will begin increasing yearly once the church reaches the year 2000. Percentage-wise, the number of seminarians is also outstripping the overall growth of the Catholic population.



AP/Wide World Photos
PAPAL VISIT — While touring Europe, former President Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy, met privately Sept. 20 with Pope John Paul II at Castel Gandolfo, the pope's summer residence. The couple talked with the pontiff for approximately one-half hour before catching a flight back to the United States.

Scholars: Dissent, laxity undermining U.S. Church

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Widespread dissent from church teaching and lack of "discipline within the church" have undermined the vitality of U.S. Catholicism in the past quarter-century, the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars said in a statement issued Sept. 20.

"If the unity of the Catholic faith is to be maintained, we believe that unity of discipline must be re-established within the church," the 1,000-member organization said.

"Ideally, preaching and teaching, sacramental life especially, take precedence over law and discipline," it said. "But it is the lack of discipline — the refusal to obey — that has rendered ineffective the (church's) preaching, teaching and norms for worthy sacramental practice."

The fellowship said that since the Second Vatican Council, widespread "debate and doubt" in the Catholic academic world on a number of "binding teachings" of the church "weakened the unity, vitality and dynamism of the Catholic Church in the United States."

The fellowship, founded in 1977 to promote adherence to "the entire faith of the Catholic Church," issued its statement in the form of a 27-page booklet entitled "Vatican II: Promise and Reality — The Catholic Church in the United States 25 Years after Vatican II."

It said the reforms and updating of the church's self-understanding mandated by the council "have faithfully and, in the main, successfully been implemented."

But at the same time, it said, the church in the United States has experienced "a

multitude of dysfunctions" in the intervening years.

It said two "especially important" elements affecting the state of the church today are a decline in "the general religious observance of U.S. Catholics" and a "disarray in the contemporary church" due to "trends in Catholic academic circles since 1965."

Among a "multitude of unacceptable theories" that "contributed substantially to this general weakening of the church," the fellowship cited theological dissent against church teaching on artificial contraception, proportionalist theories of morality and questioning by theologians of a number of church dogmas, doctrines and policies.

The statement also criticized "banal, free-wheeling liturgies" and pastoral practices that it said contributed to a decline in the sacrament of penance.

It said many religious communities, under the auspices of renewal, "abandoned religious life as defined by the church," and many Catholic colleges and universities "declared themselves free from oversight by the church's teaching office and have survived this schism without censure."

The fellowship said the National Conference of Catholic Bishops contributed to problems in the church when, in preparing a major study on U.S. priests and national pastoral letters on peace, the economy and women, bishops relied on scholars "already well known for their disagreement with a variety of church teachings and norms."

"More than once bishops were urged to include on these drafting committees recognized scholars with different viewpoints ... This advice generally has not been heeded," the fellowship said.

Among problems in U.S. Catholic practice the fellowship cited declines in Mass attendance, non-adherence to church teachings on sex and marriage, sharp losses in religious vocations and the loss of "a generation of young people who had received inadequate, confused or contradictory religious instruction."

The fellowship compared the situation today with the "sorry state" of U.S. Catholic belief and practice at the beginning of the 19th century. It said that the bishops of the 19th century responded with strong leadership and legislation to form a church which, by the early 20th century, had become "a model of unity and piety for churches everywhere."

"The church's teaching office today should take a lesson from this problem and this solution of more than a century ago," it said. "Courageous and wise leadership from diocesan bishops turned the tide then; it can turn the tide, we believe, now."

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