

Synod opens with review of last 25 years

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican's chief doctrinal official, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, spoke of a growing identity crisis in the clergy during the years since the Second Vatican Council.

Focusing on the state of faith in Europe, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, the Curia's former chief ecumenical officer, warned against viewing the church's past through rose-colored glasses.

Both men, key figures in the postconciliar church, spoke Oct. 1 to more than 220 bishops from around the world who are beginning a monthlong meeting on priestly formation with a review of the 25 years since the Synod of Bishops was formed.

Cardinal Ratzinger, delivering the first major address of the synod, described the postconciliar priesthood as "in crisis," with a loss of priestly identity and a huge drop in vocations.

Cardinal Willebrands cautioned against looking back to a golden age when churches were full and vocations numerous. This "nostalgia," he said, often masks a less rosy reality.

The talks were part of a session devoted to the anniversary of Pope Paul VI's 1965 order establishing the synod as a permanent advisory body that meets about once every three years. It was one of the most important structural changes to come out of the Second Vatican Council.

Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, said the modern crisis of priestly identity was evident in the numbers of priests who had resigned and in the vocations drop since the council.

One cause of the problem, he said, was that Catholic theology had failed to adequately respond to a school of thought that sees the priesthood in a less sacramental light.

This vision of the priesthood, he said, goes back to 16th-century Protestant objections: It understands ministry as relatively undefined and would see negative connotations in the terms "priesthood, sacrifice or cult," he said.

Others have misunderstood the very image of Christ, which is the model for the priesthood, Cardinal Ratzinger said. For example, he said, some people in the second half of our century have connected

Christ with communist philosopher Karl Marx, seeing Jesus as a rebel or as a leader come to liberate the poor from the oppression of the rich.

The real image of Christ in the Bible is very different, Cardinal Ratzinger said. It is essentially the image of a man who emptied himself of his own will in order to do God's will, he said.

Cardinal Ratzinger emphasized that the powers of the priesthood are sacramental and come from God. Thus, they cannot simply be delegated by a community or taken up by an individual. A basic difference also exists between the sacramental priestly ministry and the "priesthood of the faithful," which refers to the whole people of God, he said.

A priest, the cardinal said, must love the whole church and therefore be a man for others. But he must also have a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ in order to be effective, he said.

Cardinal Willebrands, who retired last year as the Vatican's chief ecumenical official, gave a broader overview of the past 25 years, stressing the positive developments and the continuing faith of

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'SADDAM THE SNAKE' — 12-year-old Kuwaiti refugee Abdullah al Shabnan holds his drawing of Saddam Hussein depicted as an evil serpent being chased by a Kuwaiti helicopter. The boy, who is living in a hotel in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, called his drawing 'Saddam the Snake.'



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