

Synod debates focus on priest role, celibacy

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The world Synod of Bishops on priestly formation closed a second week of individual speeches and began debate on a midterm document that defends celibacy for priests and stresses spiritual training.

Called a "relatio," the document was presented Oct. 13 following more than 200 talks by bishops and lay experts from around the world. It sought to pull together the main synod arguments for discussion in small groups over the next two weeks.

The Synod of Bishops, which meets every few years to discuss a major church topic, was scheduled to close Oct. 28.

Written by Brazilian Cardinal Lucas Moreira Neves, the relatio said:

- Celibacy cannot be separated from priestly life — even though the worldwide priest shortage can lead to the "temptation" of suggesting the ordination of married men.

- Doctrinal content should be emphasized in seminaries, since many candidates arrive with gaps in their understanding of basic church teachings.

- A pre-seminary year of spiritual formation, which has worked well on local levels, might now be considered for the universal church.

The relatio said seminarians and priests should learn how to relate well to women, avoiding both "too much familiarity" and "shyness." It did not discuss the role of women in the formation of priests, an issue that had been raised by several bishops.

On other controversial questions — such as the relation between a priest's spiritual identity and his social role — the relatio noted the wide divergence of opinions and asked for further debate.

The identity issue was at the heart of many individual speeches during the week of Oct. 8-13. Bishops discussed how much the priest is "of the people" and how closely his formation should reflect his

local culture.

Some bishops called for freedom in devising local formation programs that go outside the classic seminary tradition. Major differences surfaced over whether priests should be trained as social as well as sacramental leaders of their communities.

The synod also continued to hear:

- A mild, running debate over celibacy and how it can best be understood. Several Europeans urged a strong reaffirmation of the celibacy requirement, while some Africans reminded their colleagues that it poses some practical problems for priests.

- Calls for improved spiritual formation as the keystone to seminary improvement. The particular proposals varied from Ignatian exercises to the pre-seminary "spiritual year."

- Recurrent suggestions that more emphasis be placed on the Bible in seminary programs, especially in places where evangelical sects are "having a field day," as one bishop put it.

The words "culture" and "community" appeared many times in synod speeches, but the accent was often very different. In the synod's first week, several bishops spoke of contemporary culture as a hindrance to formation and said a priest's prophetic role must often be countercultural.

That sentiment was echoed by Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Brussels,

who said there is a danger that a priest's spirituality can be eclipsed by social engagement.

Other bishops during the second week of talks, however, especially those from Africa, Asia and Latin America, argued that for a priest to do his job well today he must be adept in local politics, economics and even manual labor in some places.

Bolivian Archbishop Luis Sainz Hinojosa of La Paz, for example, warned that a cultural "divorce" between the priest and his people can begin in the seminary. Archbishop Sainz, along with three other Latin Americans, said that was especially true for candidates from the region's Indian cultures.

"We cannot keep forming priests by turning our backs on the culture of the people of our country," he said.

Bishop Oscar Paez Gercete of San Pedro, Paraguay, called for a special formation plan for native candidates as an "act of homage" to them on the 500th anniversary of Latin America's evangelization.

Brazilian Bishop Jayme Chemello of Pelotas strongly defended his country's controversial "small group" seminaries, in which communities of about 20 candidates live in houses with a rector and a spiritual director. The houses are not

Continued on page 18



AP/Wide World Photos
WARM GREETING — Mother Teresa greets Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen at the airport during his Oct. 12 visit to Calcutta, India.

New York Klan leader voluntarily withdraws from Knights' council

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The head of the New York state Ku Klux Klan voluntarily withdrew from the Knights of Columbus after the Knights' national chaplain said the man had to choose between the two organizations.

Albert Castello, state head of the Knights of Columbus, told Catholic News Service Oct. 10 that William Hoff, the 55-year-old grand wizard of the New York state unit of the Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, went to his local council Oct. 7 to withdraw from the Knights of Columbus.

Castello said Hoff filled out a form at the Colon-Monsignor Higgins Council of the Knights of Columbus in Queens and "it's a done deal."

Bishop Thomas V. Daily of Brooklyn, national supreme chaplain of the Knights, had issued a statement declaring that "membership in the KKK is incompatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church."

The bishop, whose diocese includes Queens, said there was no evidence that the Klan had turned away from its longstanding opposition to Catholics, Jews,

African-Americans and foreign-born persons."

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York also denounced the Klan in the homily at his Oct. 7 Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral.


"Membership (in the Ku Klux Klan) is a disgrace to Catholicism," he said. "Let that be clear."

Hoff reportedly had been the chief organizer of his Knights of Columbus council's food drive that provides Thanksgiving meals mostly to black residents in a public housing project.

However, the *New York Post* quoted him as saying, "I don't care too much for blacks. Whites have become second-class citizens. I believe in standing up for white people in this country."

"I don't care what any church teaching is about the KKK," Hoff added. "I don't ask them and I don't ask the postman or the man in the street."

Russell Shaw, national spokesman of the Knights of Columbus, said that even if Hoff had not withdrawn, he was "not a member in good standing" if he also belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. "It's an open and shut case," he said.



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