

Theologians criticize papal style

By Jerry Fliteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — At least 431 members of the Catholic Theological Society of America have called "excessive Roman centralization" under Pope John Paul II an obstacle to church renewal.

Released Dec. 13, the statement was the first major criticism of Vatican actions by a large number of theologians since hundreds of European theologians endorsed the Cologne Declaration in 1989.

Written by a CTSA committee and approved by U.S. and Canadian theologians by mail-in secret ballots, the statement cited problems with Rome in four key areas of church life — the Vatican's treatment of bishops, theologians, women in the church and ecumenism.

They said some statements and actions by the Roman Curia have undermined the authority of bishops' conferences and of some individual bishops.

The pope and his Curia have adopted a narrow view of legitimate theology and a narrow understanding of the "proper role" of women, they said.

The cause of Christian unity has been hurt by a lack of ecumenical leadership and an "authoritarian style of acting" by the Vatican, they added.

They contrasted the Vatican style of leadership on those issues with the style of the U.S. and Canadian bishops, generally praising their own bishops for collegiality, good relations with theologians and strong pastoral leadership on ecumenism and women's concerns.

The theologians called for "critical reflection and discussion within the church" on the issues raised by their statement.

Canadian Basilian Father Walter H. Principe, CTSA president, emphasized that the statement — despite its critical

stance — was not an act of dissent from church teachings.

"The document focuses not on doctrines but on actions and procedures, many of them coming from the Vatican Curia," he said.

The 3,000-word document was titled "Do Not Extinguish the Spirit." Extensive footnotes gave examples of specific Vatican actions giving rise to the problems the document cited.

The text was mailed to the society's 1,400 members Nov. 14 with a Dec. 1 deadline for returning their ballots. Of the 544 members who cast their votes by the deadline, 431 approved the statement. Ninety-one, or 17 percent, rejected it, and 22, or 4 percent, abstained.

The short statement of approval which the theologians actually voted on said: "I judge the document, 'Do Not Extinguish the Spirit,' to be generally accurate. It expresses serious theological and ecclesial concerns which are shared by many North American theologians and which deserve further critical reflection and discussion within the church."

Following the vote, the society sent copies of the statement to the U.S. and Canadian bishops under a cover letter dated Dec. 8, the 25th anniversary of the

close of the Second Vatican Council.

In his letter to the bishops, Father Principe said, "The concerns we express come from our loyalty to and love for the church."

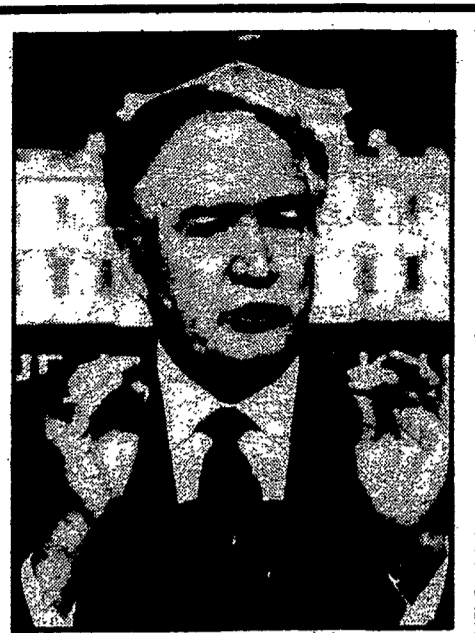
To give bishops an opportunity to read the statement first, it was not made available to the media until the following week.

The theologians presented the statement as "some reflections on the church in the United States and Canada 25 years after Vatican II."

It was the result of a resolution passed at the society's 1989 convention, when members asked the CTSA board to examine issues raised in the Cologne Declaration and comment on them from "a North American perspective."

The Cologne Declaration was issued in January, 1989, by 163 European theologians, mainly from Germany, to protest against what they called "exaggerated hierarchical control ... suppression of the theological debate ... centralization ... autocratic methods ... (and) arbitrary procedures" coming from Rome under Pope John Paul. That declaration received further support in subsequent statements by Italian, Spanish and French theologians.

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File photo
CAVAZOS RESIGNS — Catholic educators praised the efforts of resigning U.S. Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos to promote parental choice in education, but said they hoped his successor would be more aggressive in improving the nation's schools. Cavazos, the first Hispanic-American cabinet member, did not explain in his Dec. 12 resignation letter why he quit or what he plans to do.

Anti-euthanasia group condemns Missouri ruling

CARTHAGE, Mo. (CNS) — An anti-euthanasia group has condemned a Missouri judge's Dec. 14 ruling in favor of requests by Nancy Beth Cruzan's family and her court-appointed guardian that the comatose woman's nutrition and hydration be cut off and she be allowed to die.

The International Anti-Euthanasia Task Force said Jasper County Circuit Court Judge Charles E. Teel's decision amounted to approval of "capital punishment for the 'crime' of being disabled."

In a friend-of-the-court brief in the case, the group, based at the University of Steubenville in Ohio, had urged Teel to "recognize the absolute necessity to protect persons with disabilities."

Cruzan, 32, has been comatose since a 1983 automobile accident.

William H. Colby, attorney for Cruzan's parents, Lester and Joyce Cruzan, had said that if the request was granted, the family would immediately drive to the hospital to see that it was carried out. State authorities had agreed to abide by Teel's decision.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court said a

state's interest in preserving life may supersede the wishes of the family in cases where a patient is in an irreversible coma-like state. It said there was no "clear and convincing proof" that Cruzan would have wanted nutrition and hydration withdrawn.

In September, Missouri Attorney General William Webster withdrew as a party to the case, saying that the state's interest had been to establish a "standard of proof" in such cases. As a result, there was no one officially opposing the request.

At a November hearing reopening the case, Thad C. McCause, the young woman's court-appointed guardian, presented three new witnesses who testified that Cruzan had told them more than 10 years ago that she would not want to live "like a vegetable" on medical machinery.

"There comes a time when litigation must be ended, when difficult questions must be resolved and when reason should triumph over ritual," McCause said in a brief filed Dec. 5.

Dr. James C. Davis, who treated Cruzan

daily at the state hospital in Mount Vernon, Mo., also testified in favor of removing nutrition and hydration, a move he had opposed in 1988.

In a Dec. 14 statement, Rita Marker, director of the International Anti-Euthanasia Task Force, said the decision marked an end to "the three-and-one-half-year frenzy to kill Nancy Beth Cruzan" but said "the horror of what has been set in motion today is only beginning."

In the group's brief, attorney Cecilia A. Rauth described Cruzan as "a severely disabled person" who is "medically vulnerable."

"The case before this court is not about Nancy Beth Cruzan's own decisions concerning her medical care," said the brief. "It is a case about whether others have the right to deliberately cause her death by starvation and dehydration. It is, in addition, a case about whether health professionals will be forced to carry out orders to starve and dehydrate those within their care."



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