

Consultation highlights U.S. church leaders

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — An unusual consultation will occur at the Vatican next week, one which finds the universal church lending an attentive ear to the teaching voice of a single national hierarchy.

Selected bishops from around the world have been called in to talk about the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on women's concerns, currently in its ninth year of preparation. Vatican officials will also participate.

Church sources said the May 28-29 meeting will offer international "balance" to an important document on a sensitive topic. It will also give the Vatican some chance for direct input — Rome is uncomfortable sitting on the sidelines while a national conference breaks new ground, they said.

The U.S. church is scheduled to send six representatives.

They are: Archbishops Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, William H. Keeler of Baltimore and J. Francis Stafford of Denver; Bishops Joseph L. Imesch of Joliet, Ill., and Matthew H. Clark of Rochester; and Monsignor Robert N. Lynch, general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops-U.S. Catholic Conference.

Archbishops Pilarczyk and Keeler are president and vice president, respectively, of the NCCB-USCC; Archbishop Stafford is a member of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Bishop Imesch is chairman of the bishops' writing committee for the women's pastoral, and Bishop Clark is chairman of the NCCB Committee on Women in Society and in the Church.

Some Catholics might see the encounter as an attempt at Vatican control over bishops' conferences. The meeting, according to one curial official, was the idea of Pope John Paul II, and it has caused the U.S. bishops to delay their final vote on the document.

But this consultation can be read another way, church officials acknowledged. It signals that the old model of church teaching "from the top down" is becoming more flexible. Here, a single bishops' conference has pushed a major issue into the universal arena, prompting a wide-ranging discussion that otherwise might not have occurred.

The second draft of the pastoral letter on women, made public a year ago, addresses controversial topics. It calls sexism a sin and, while defending the church's ban on women priests, calls for a reversal of church norms that exclude women from other ministries.

The Vatican secretary of state, Archbishop Angelo Sodano, who helped organize the May consultation, said its purpose was to assure that U.S. bishops are "in tune" with papal thinking and that of other episcopates on women's role in the church.

It will be "a good thing" for U.S. bishops to hear the views of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's doctrinal congregation, Archbishop Sodano said. But he said, "There are no problems on the theological level."

The consultation will be an information exchange, the archbishop said, allowing bishops from other parts of the world to describe their cultural, economic and social situations, but leaving individual bishops' conferences free to deal with practical problems in their own countries.

One Vatican official said the meeting highlights the increasing influence of U.S. culture around the world, and the importance of what U.S. bishops have to say about new issues. He noted that there was a similar international consultation when the U.S. bishops wrote their pastoral letter on war and peace in 1983, although that meeting came more at the behest of other bishops' conferences than the Vatican.

In this case, the Vatican recognizes that "what's happening in one conference is going to have repercussions in the whole world," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

The question of women's dignity and equality is intensely felt in the United States today, he said — another example of where "U.S. bishops are almost constrained to deal with a problem before other conferences are even aware of it."

The Vatican knows that what the U.S. hierarchy says and does has an enormous impact outside its borders, and that the challenges faced by U.S. culture "strongly influence great portions of the globe today," he said.

Another official involved in the meeting said one reason the Vatican gives special attention to the U.S. bishops' conference is because "everything it does gets publicized and filtered around."

One expert on bishops' conferences said the Vatican-sponsored meeting might turn out to be a milestone in collegiality — the responsibility shared by all bishops for church teaching and governance.

The meeting "can be considered a very positive development" and a sign that "collegiality works in a horizontal way," said Jesuit Father Angel Anton Gomez, who teaches at Rome's Gregorian University.

The U.S. church is more sensitive to the issue of women's dignity, he said, and has valuable theological and sociological experience in this area. The rest of the church can "profit" by hearing what they have to say, Father Anton said.

Bishop Eugenio Corecco of Lugano, Switzerland, who is less enthusiastic about the teaching role of bishops' conferences, said the consultation would be "very positive" as an opportunity to "balance" the U.S. document.

Bishop Corecco was in Rome to address a symposium on the teaching role of bishops' conferences, a topic currently under study by the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. He argued that sometimes-different teachings of various bishops' conferences can cause confusion.

Bishop Corecco also said he thought any statement by a bishops' conference that concerns doctrinal issues should require unanimous approval by member bishops.

The U.S. bishops' pastoral on women has already had one dose of papal input. In 1988, shortly after the first draft of the U.S. document appeared, the pope announced that he was writing an apostolic letter on women. His *Mulieris Dignitatem* ("The Dignity of Women") was published later that year, and the U.S. bishops referred to its teachings several times in the second draft of their own document.



AP/Wide World Photos
DYSENTERY VICTIM — Rajia Begum breastfeeds her baby on the floor of Bangladesh's Chittagong Children's Hospital, where her son, Aktar Hossain 12 (left), is hospitalized with dysentery.

Peace talks continue in Northern Ireland

By Bronwen Dachs
Catholic News Service

BELFAST, Northern Ireland — "Just because you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, it doesn't mean it isn't there," said Richard McAuley of Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Army's political arm.

All sides in Northern Ireland echo the same feeling that a solution exists to the sectarian conflict in the British province, but how that "light" is to be reached is the key question.

Moderate Catholics and some Unionists — the pro-British Protestant majority — see the possibility of peace between the Protestant and Catholic communities in a province still connected to Britain. Sinn Fein, meanwhile, sees the possibility of peace only when the British are out and the province is re-split to Ireland.

While speaking out strongly against the politically motivated violence of both sectarian extremes, the Catholic Church has sought economic and political justice for Catholics.

Talks between the parties in search of harmony between the communities began April 30 under British sponsorship. The

discussions were preceded by acts of terrorism by Catholic and Protestant extremists.

But the talks nearly collapsed over a dispute concerning the site of the next round, due to begin in June. British Prime Minister John Major proposed a compromise — beginning in London, moving to Northern Ireland and finishing in Dublin, the Irish capital — which was apparently acceptable.

Jim Wilson, general secretary of the Ulster Unionist Council, the main Protestant party, said he believes his constituency and the Catholic community are "moving closer together" politically and in other ways.

Wilson, interviewed at the party's headquarters in Belfast, also said he doesn't like to use the terms Protestant and Catholic in a political context.

Talks involving the Ulster Unionist Council; the Social Democratic Labor Party, which is mainly Catholic and moderate; and the Rev. Ian Paisley's more hardline Democratic Unionist Party "are already bringing about improvements in social and health services" and other areas, Wilson said.

He also said both sets of Unionists are "committed to preserving our British way of life" in Northern Ireland.

"It is a much more prosperous way of life than in the (Irish) republic," he said. "We have a much freer way of life. Religion is not shoved down our throats as it is in the South."

But McAuley said Sinn Fein believes that "as long as Britain continues to involve itself in Ireland, as long as Ireland is partitioned, the conditions for political conflict will continue to exist." He said the party would like to see Britain withdraw from the province over a "reasonable time."

He said a reasonable period would be five years. An immediate withdrawal would create a "political vacuum" in which conditions "could get worse,"

McAuley said.

Sinn Fein's links with the outlawed IRA have prompted other political groups in Ulster to exclude it from the latest round of talks on the province's future.

While McAuley said Sinn Fein "will sit
Continued on page 5



AP/Wide World Photos
CELEBRATING FREEDOMS — A supporter of Russian Federation leader Boris Yeltsin holds a poster saying, "He is still moving forward," during a May 11 demonstration marking independent free press day in Moscow. Yeltsin is a candidate for president of the Russian Republic.

BARTOLOMEO FUNERAL HOME, INC.

Peter W. Guilan, Jr. Philip P. Perotto Michael P. Perotto
Personalized service in the community since 1922.
1425 Lexington Avenue Rochester, NY 14606
conveniently located near 390
(715) 254-5400