

# Vatican meeting convenes range of pro-life factions

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In the first meeting of its kind, representatives from a broad range of pro-life movements came to the Vatican to discuss their work and to debate strategies in the fight against abortion.

The Nov. 14-16 encounter began quietly, with speeches by officials of the sponsoring Pontifical Council for the Family. It ended on an activist note, when one group took the microphone after the session was officially closed to read an open letter to Pope John Paul II.

Among those attending was Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, the controversial U.S. organization that uses civil disobedience to block abortion clinics. Participants' reactions were mixed on Operation Rescue's tactics, with some expressing admiration and others questioning the group's effectiveness.

Eight pro-life groups — including Operation Rescue — sponsored a petition to the pope, calling for excommunication of Catholic politicians who refuse to "repent and retract" statements in favor of abortion. The petition was handed to the pontiff during a group meeting Nov. 15.

In a talk to the approximately 150 participants, the pope stressed cooperation among pro-life groups and said they should respect their different approaches to the issue.

The basic pro-life task is to "help people reflect on the fact that every life has inestimable worth" because it is a gift of God, he said. It is a message that should be proclaimed at all levels of society, he said.

In describing the gravity of the problem, the pope spoke about abortion in the same dramatic terms he has used increasingly over the last year. He left no doubt that one reason the Vatican has sponsored several meetings on pro-life issues in 1991 is because it has a sense of urgency about the issue.

The pope said the modern age witnesses "exterminations at a rate never seen before in the history of humanity," and he warned that "strong and potent forces" are promoting a "culture of death."

Among these forces, he said, were selfishness, consumerism, economic interests and "a superficial feminism

that is afraid of the greatness of maternity."

He urged societies to adopt "a clear policy favoring life and the dignity of woman," at the political, legislative and individual levels.

Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, head of the Council for the Family, said the Vatican had called the meeting so the church and other organizations could better counter a "dangerous concentration of anti-life forces."

Despite today's threat, the cardinal said, the church remains optimistic.

D-N.Y.; and Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice.

Joseph Scheidler, director of the Pro-Life Action League, handed the petition to the pope. Scheidler later said he was pleased that the Vatican meeting "did start to aim toward action."

Scheidler was one of about 50 participants who signed a separate open letter to the pontiff, asking, among other things, that the pope encourage local bishops to condemn the "scandal" of Catholic politicians who support the right of women to have abor-

about Catholic politicians "declaring a pro-abortion stance and nothing being done about it."

But people were divided on whether the church hierarchy should take specific action against them, she said.

Bishop James T. McHugh of Camden, N.J., a member of the U.S. bishops' pro-life committee, said he thought the idea of the church disciplining such politicians would be ineffective and inadvisable.

Participants also expressed a wide range of opinions on Operation Rescue's confrontational tactics. Yet the fact that the group was invited at all was seen as significant by many of those present. Observers said that if the invitation did not constitute a Vatican endorsement of the organization, it was at least a nod of recognition.

"I'm tremendously encouraged to be here, and I think it's an implicit recognition of Rescue as a viable part of the pro-life movement," said Terry, a born-again Christian. He met briefly with the pope, giving him an Operation Rescue book, videotape and T-shirt.

Terry addressed the assembly for about five minutes in the final session. Afterward, several participants expressed admiration for rescue's courage, but some were doubtful about whether civil disobedience would work for them.

Silvio Ghielmi, a leading Italian pro-life activist, said rescue's tactics can be "excellent" in the right cultural context. But there is a risk that such groups will be seen as "condemning the sinner as well as the sin" and will therefore be counterproductive, he said.

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Pope John Paul II

"We are absolutely convinced of our eventual victory over the culture of death," he said.

That conviction appeared to be one point of consensus during the meeting. Another was encouragement — expressed in a message to the pope — for a papal encyclical on life issues. Such an encyclical also was suggested by cardinals meeting at the Vatican last spring.

The main differences that emerged from the encounter concerned strategy — for example, what to do about Catholic politicians who favor abortion rights.

The petition presented to the pope sought direct intervention by the hierarchy in this regard. It accused 27 U.S. politicians and abortion-rights supporters — 26 of them Catholics — of "notorious acts and/or statements which enable, support or condone abortion."

The petition asked the pope to declare that the politicians' actions are contrary to the faith and a scandal to the church, and said that if public retraction is not made, he should excommunicate them.

New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., were on the list. Others included House Speaker Thomas S. Foley, D-Wash.; Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan,

tions.

Those who drafted the letter had expected being able to read it during the final assembly. When Cardinal Lopez Trujillo ended the meeting before that was possible, Philippine activist Cecilia de Siebenthal walked to the podium and began reading the text aloud, as the cardinal and other officials looked on.

People were still signing the letter when ushers turned out the lights in the hall 10 minutes later.

Gail Quinn, director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, said many participants expressed frustration



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