

Pope opens synod, evokes unity

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II opened the European Synod of Bishops by invoking Christian unity and a spirit of forgiveness on the continent — issues that, in one form or another, dominated the first three days of the assembly's proceedings.

In speeches delivered on the synod floor Nov. 28-30, more than 30 bishops zeroed in on crucial problems facing the church in Europe:

- How to mend relations with the Orthodox in former communist countries.

- How much support to give nationalist movements.

- How to best restore pastoral structures in the impoverished East.

Throughout, the bishops tried to better define what the church means when it speaks of a "new evangelization" for Europe. Most placed the accent on cooperation and service.

The Nov. 28-Dec. 14 synod was called by the pope to reflect on the new opportunities facing the church in post-communist Europe. The pope also wanted the assembly to be a visible sign of Christian unity, and he invited Orthodox and Protestant church representatives as "fraternal delegates." But leaders of five Orthodox churches, including the Moscow patriarchate, declined the invitation, citing new ecumenical tensions.

In an opening Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Nov. 28, the pope welcomed the Protestants and Orthodox who did attend and said their advice would be "greatly appreciated." He prefaced his remarks with a call to reconciliation.

"We should always forgive and re-

member that we, too, are in need of forgiveness. We need to be forgiven much more often than we need to forgive," the pope said.

The tone of humility set by the pope's speech was also reflected in an opening address by Cardinal Ruini, who said it was time to praise God for what he has done and "recognize our own faults and omissions."

Cardinal Ruini said the re-appearance of tensions among Christians "makes it urgent for us to search for every means to free ecumenical questions from historical prejudice and political conditioning." Catholic-Orthodox disputes in Europe are frequently the product of centuries-old enmities, complicated by the communist attempt to suppress local Eastern-rite Catholic communities.

His remarks were taken by many as a response to a pre-synod critique made by European Jewish leaders, who questioned whether the church's emphasis on the "Christian roots" of the continent neglected the Jewish contribution.

Cardinal George Basil Hume of London said that if the church is serious about resolving European ecumenical problems, it should adopt the structured and patient theological approach employed in its dialogue with Anglicans.

Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, apostolic administrator of Moscow, tackled the sensitive issue of Catholic-Orthodox relations. While expressing regret over the absence of a representative from the Russian Orthodox Church, he made no apologies for the Catholic Church's growth and expansion in Russia.

"We cannot prevent Russians from

joining our church. It is not proselytism to accept them," the archbishop said. He said Catholics and Orthodox should concentrate on what unites them, collaborating in the rebuilding of Russian society.

The archbishop also asked Western churches for help in rebuilding and urged them to "send priests and catechists."

Among the Orthodox absent from the synod was the Serbian church. Serbian Patriarch Pavle I, in a last-minute decision, said he would not send a representative because of the activities of Eastern-rite Catholic churches in some "Orthodox nations," according to Italian wire services.

The Serbian delegation had been included in the Vatican list of synod participants, and their expected presence — together with Croatian Cardinal Franjo Kuharic — had been foreseen as an important sign of reconciliation, even as their peoples were involved in a tragic civil war.

The form and content of Europe's "new evangelization" was much debated, but one common element seemed to be protection of human life — especially of society's weakest members. Several speakers specifically mentioned the church's fight against abortion as a part of this strategy.

Bishop William Kenney, vice president of European Caritas, said the church needs to recognize and be with those who suffer most on its own continent: the "refugee child," people with AIDS, the "unmarried mother who may have rejected abortion but who is still in daily need for survival," and the poor in Eastern Europe who are facing a long, cold winter of hardship.

Two Vatican officials had specific advice for the synod and Europe.



AP/Wide World Photos
STREET KIDS' CHRISTMAS — Street children improvise a Christmas tree in a downtown square of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil Nov. 27. The government has been criticized for failing to stop the deaths of hundreds of street kids at the hands of "death squads" working for local merchants.

Cardinal Pio Laghi, head of the Congregation for Catholic Education, said East European churches have generally abundant vocations but few places to train priests, while in the West there are "strong structures but spiritual weakness" and few vocations. He said an exchange of gifts would be useful for both: the "scholarly theology" of the West will be enriched by contact with the "theology of the cross" in the East.

U.S. Archbishop John Foley, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, was the first to speak in the general assembly. He proposed better church use of newspapers, TV and other media could help replace the "false unity" imposed by communism. The church has the right to run its own media and to have access for religious programming in private and public broadcasting, he said.



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