

# European synod urges religions to cooperate

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — After two and a half weeks of speeches and debate, the special Synod of Bishops on Europe ended with a strong call to evangelize the continent through prayer, personal witness and ecumenical cooperation.

A declaration issued at the close of the Nov. 28-Dec. 14 synod hailed the demise of communism, but said the church must now overcome such obstacles as religious indifference, consumerism and misperceived freedom.

On the meeting's most controversial issue — tensions with Orthodox churches — the statement said Catholic bishops left the synod more convinced that evangelization is "the common task of all Christians" and that the church's credibility depends on ecumenical cooperation.

But amid sharp criticism from Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant delegates, the synod recognized that "many things still sadly separate" Christians.

In the wake of the synod, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, is said to be writing a letter to the heads of the Orthodox churches. No information on the content of that letter has been released.

Pope John Paul II, who convened the synod to map out church strategies in the post-communist era, ended it with several questions about Europe's fu-

ture during a Mass Dec. 14. He painted a less-than-rosy picture.

"In this Europe which aspires toward unity there are many worries, threats and tensions," he said. "Will the church be able to be a promoter of true peace?"

"Will it be able to transfer reconciliation ... to the interpersonal and international levels?" he asked.

The pope said the answers to such questions will depend on the church's ability to spread the "saving word of Christ" in a way that is united and coherent to today's men and women.

Underscoring the open-ended nature of this synod was the pope's request for a permanent organization to implement the conclusions of the meeting. Synod officials said the organization, to be approved by the pope, would give Rome a more direct voice in European evangelization efforts.

The synod, attended by about 135 delegates, undertook no concrete initiatives at the end of its own deliberations. The 13-page declaration, the product of small-group discussions and hundreds of suggested amendments during the week of Dec. 7-14, stuck to very general themes.

Its most specific comments were on the need for cooperation between Catholics and other Christians, as well as Jews and Muslims.

"It certainly pained us that some Orthodox churches felt unable to accept the invitation to our assembly," it said. Five of eight Orthodox churches



**DOWN AND OUT** — A Soviet beggar leans on an underpass wall in downtown Moscow Dec. 13. The U.S. administration announced Dec. 12 that President George Bush will meet with U.S. allies in January to coordinate the flow of food, medicine, fuel and shelter to the former Soviet republics.

declined to send representatives, citing new tensions with local Catholic churches in Eastern Europe.

In light of the new difficulties, the synod statement said, the church should ask itself whether dialogue with the Orthodox "has always been conducted properly." In any case, it added, the Catholic Church wants to continue the dialogue "vigorously" and in a deeper way.

In a speech to the synod Dec. 13, the pope struck a similar tone, saying the Orthodox absence was an "emptiness" for the synod. But he said reflection on this experience may end up serving the cause of unity.

Three non-Catholics who did attend the synod told reporters Dec. 13 that they wished their suggestions had been taken more seriously.

"I have no doubts that the Catholic Church is committed to ecumenism, but most of them (synod members) have very little idea of what it means," said Anglican Bishop Mark Santer, moderator of the synod discussion group that included the non-Catholics.

At the center of the synod's final statement was the question of how to evangelize on a continent that appears liberated from totalitarianism, but in which "people still think and behave as if there were no God."

The heart of the answer, according to the declaration, is to preach, "God loves you. Christ comes for you."

Evangelization involves the whole church and is best carried out through prayer, participation in the sacraments, religious instruction and the daily witness Christians give, it said. The synod said the planned universal catechism will help the church's effort.

Today's "new martyrs" are valuable witnesses, the synod statement said, citing the experience of the church under East European communism.

In building the "new Europe," the document said the church must promote human dignity, respect for minorities and equality between the weak and the strong. Lay people and seminarians should know the church's social doctrine well — a point strongly made in several early synod speeches.

The synod was designed as an "exchange of gifts" between liberated churches of the East and the more pastorally organized churches of the West. The final declaration said the East European churches had offered "the witness of living faith, faithfulness in suffering and sadness, and outstanding harmony with the Holy See."

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