

Vatican memo offers challenges

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

According to *The New York Times* of May 28, 1992, the Vatican circulated a confidential memorandum to embassies in Rome several weeks ago regarding the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

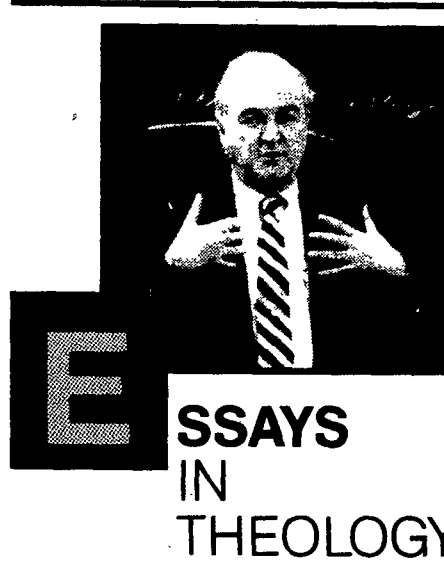
For those who don't always read beyond the headlines or lead paragraphs, the story might have only confirmed an impression that the Catholic Church's leadership is obsessed with the birth control issue.

It's true that the Vatican expressed a concern about the summit's handling of the population problem, and that during preparatory negotiations in New York in April, Vatican diplomats had insisted on changing the wording in references to "family planning."

They proposed as an alternate formulation, "the responsible planning of family size in keeping with fundamental dignity and personally held values and taking into account ethical and cultural considerations."

The reporter for the *Times* characterized the wording as "cumbersome," noting that it was designed to reflect the Catholic Church's "prohibition on all forms of artificial birth control."

But Vatican officials pointed out that there are also human and religious rights issues at stake here, since some governmental programs



— such as China's — place strictly enforced limits on family size, while others — such as Brazil's — offer incentives for sterilization.

One of the Vatican delegates to the Earth Summit characterized as "a little bit naive" the argument of some development experts that expanding third-world populations are the principal cause of poverty in those regions.

The Vatican memorandum had noted that the relationship of development and the environment to population growth is "complex and often tenuous," insisting that population growth of itself is "seldom the primary cause of environmental problems."

Up to this point, liberal heads may give a knowing nod. "When are we going to learn? Populations are exploding, resources are dwindling, and we're still on this birth control kick."

But the Vatican's position is more nuanced than it might first appear.

The Vatican's point is that, in making population growth the primary factor in overcoming ecological problems, programs for population control that are directed and financed by the developed nations of the North "easily become a substitute for justice and development in the developing nations of the South."

That seems to make a lot of sense. In fact, the argument is equally pertinent to the domestic front.

Might it not be turned against the thinking of many Americans — including Catholics — who look at the problems of our inner cities in much the same way as the governments of the North look at the poverty-stricken countries of the South?

"If only we could get 'them' (read: blacks) from having so many babies ..." No mention of housing, schools, jobs or health care — just babies. In other words, population control as "a substitute for justice."

But there's more to the Vatican memorandum. It challenges Western governments, including our own, on other major points as well: for example, "the obligation to

insure a just and equitable transfer" of technology from the industrialized to the developing world, and the inclusion of war on the list of ecological disasters. (The U.S. government had sought to drop it from the list.)

"The goods of the earth — including those produced by human activity — are for the benefit of all," the memorandum asserts. "All peoples and countries have a right (my emphasis) to fundamental access to those goods — natural, spiritual, intellectual and technological — which are necessary for their internal development."

One can easily guess how that paragraph would play with politically conservative Catholics in corporate boardrooms, think-tanks and editorial offices across the land. Not very well.

And yet these are the sorts of Catholics who often instruct the rest of us about loyalty to the pope and obedience to the church's teachings.

When the U.S. bishops issued a pastoral letter on the economy in 1986, however, the letter was ridiculed from just those quarters.

The bishops were accused of making up economic rights. There's no such animal, the critics huffed.

Well, Pope John Paul II says there is, and so does this recent Vatican document.

It seems that the cafeteria line lengthens every day.

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