

Theologians see new encyclical as mixed bag

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — U.S. Catholic moral theologians gave mixed marks to the new papal encyclical on the foundations of moral theology.

A most common complaint was that the moral theories and trends the encyclical condemns are simply "caricatures" of positions actually held by any Catholic theologians.

The encyclical would have done better to describe these as problems of modern secularized culture instead of calling them errors in Catholic theology, some of them said.

Parish mourns soldier's death

By Maura Rossi
Catholic News Service

SCHOOLEY'S MOUNTAIN, N.J. — His early death in Somalia robbed U.S. Army Cpl. James E. Smith of a chance for marriage and children, but he "lived out well" the commitments he made in his short life, said the priest who baptized him 21 years ago.

About 800 mourners gathered for a memorial Mass Oct. 7 at Our Lady of the Mountain Church, Cpl. Smith's home parish.

Cpl. Smith, known to his family and friends as "Jamie," was one of 12 U.S. soldiers killed Oct. 3 in Mogadishu. His death occurred during a series of chaotic battles with the militia commanded by Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid.

Father Raymond Kupke, who presided at the young Army Ranger's memorial Mass, said Cpl. Smith's life of commitment began with baptism and continued throughout his life. The priest noted that Smith had lived out promises to respect and serve others in Boy Scouts, in his "Wolf Pack" football team at West Morris Central High School and in the Army.

"Long ago, in the Wolf Pack, he learned lessons on what it takes to fight the good fight," said Father Kupke. The priest, who also serves as Paterson's diocesan archivist, remembered the young soldier as the first baby he baptized after his ordination.

He recalled that when Cpl. Smith entered the Army he was struggling with his faith, to the point that for religious affiliation on his dog tags he listed "N.P." for "no preference."

That listing "weighed more and more heavily on our friend Jamie," the priest said, and eventually after a talk with his father he changed his tags to read "R.C." for "Roman Catholic."

Father Kupke cited Jesus' Gospel promise: "If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my father."

Among Cpl. Smith's mourners were his parents, a sister, twin brothers and the girlfriend he was going with at Fort Benning, Ga., before he shipped out to Somalia.

Many of the mourners wore their military uniforms.

Cpl. Smith's body was returned to the United States via Dover Air Force Base, Del., for burial at Fort Benning.

Several theologians contacted by Catholic News Service praised the encyclical's use of Scripture, especially in the first chapter.

And they were generally agreed that, despite advance rumors the encyclical would make new claims of church authority in moral matters, the actual text does not expand church claims beyond those already held in the mainstream of Catholic thought and teaching.

Jesuit Father Richard E. McCormick of the University of Notre Dame said the encyclical condemns theologians who treat the idea of a "fundamental option" — a moral choice setting one's basic direction in life — as if it were "something separate from one's concrete activity."

"Nobody I know says that. It's a travesty," he said.

Regarded as a leading American proponent of proportional analysis of moral acts, Father McCormick said the encyclical criticizes proportionalism

for saying some acts may be licit even when they are intrinsically evil in terms of their object.

"No one writes that," he said. Asked if he sees any of his own views among those condemned by the encyclical, he answered bluntly: "No, I don't."

Dominican Father Kevin O'Rourke, director of the Center for Health Care Ethics of St. Louis University's Medical Science Center, said that even if no major moral theologians quite fit into any of the positions condemned in the encyclical, the errors are "contained implicitly" in some theologians' writings and "are rampant in the applications being made."

Catholic theology is not carried out in an ivory tower, he said, and "in practice it becomes an American trait to say, consult your conscience first, then the teaching of the church ... If the teaching of the church agrees, you follow it; if the church doesn't, you don't."

"This encyclical will confirm what's being taught by a lot of people," Father O'Rourke added. "For people who don't accept what the church teaches, it won't eliminate their problems ... But they are not going to be able to say that the church will change its teaching."

Father Charles E. Curran of Southern Methodist University — whom the Vatican declared ineligible to teach as a Catholic theologian in the 1980s because of his arguments for less absolute Catholic positions on certain moral issues — said he saw himself depicted in one place in the encyclical.

That was where the encyclical said theologians were wrong in accusing the church of "physicalism" in its absolute prohibitions against premarital sex, homosexual activity, autoerotism, direct sterilization, artificial contraception and artificial insemination.

"It was that list of issues. Those were the issues they got me on," said Father Curran, a Rochester diocesan priest.

But in terms of theoretical positions and methodologies the encyclical condemns, Father Curran said he found neither his views nor those of any other Catholic moral theologian.

Moral theology professor Lisa Sowle Cahill of Boston College said the encyclical's "central argument," its affirmation of the need for an objective basis for moral judgments and evaluations, provides a "positive resource for a Catholic contribution" to current moral debates in Western society.

Because of lack of agreed principles on which to base reasoned public discourse, when society faces disputed is-

issues there is a "tendency to despair of a solution and to resolve all problems by leaving them to free choice," Cahill said.

The encyclical counters that by reasserting the principle that "free choice has to be placed in relationship to an objective moral viewpoint," she said.

But if the encyclical is viewed as addressed primarily to Catholic theology itself, "I don't agree with its premise that there is a crisis," she said.

"Catholic theologians share a relatively cohesive set of values.... The similarity is often neglected and the differences are played up in a very foolish, counterproductive manner," she said. "Though we have tremendous arguments among ourselves, our basic values are very similar."

Dominican Father Benedict Ashley of Aquinas Institute in St. Louis, disagreed with those who found the problems addressed by the encyclical present in the broader culture rather than within the Catholic theological community.

"The theologians are trying to mediate church teaching and culture," he said, and the views criticized "are widespread" among Catholic theologians.

He said the encyclical praises the efforts of moral theologians "to place moral theology on a more biblical basis" and to make it more Christ-centered and less legalistic. It also supports efforts to bring moral theology into contact with psychology and other modern sciences, he said.

Father Ashley described the division

among moral theologians today as a split between those who insist that "you have to be very clear about objective morality" while being considerate of people in pastoral practice, and "on the other side, those who say you have to show theoretically that (what is done in) pastoral practice is all right."

The church's traditional approach has been to be very firm about the general teaching while showing leniency in pastoral practice in difficult situations, he said.

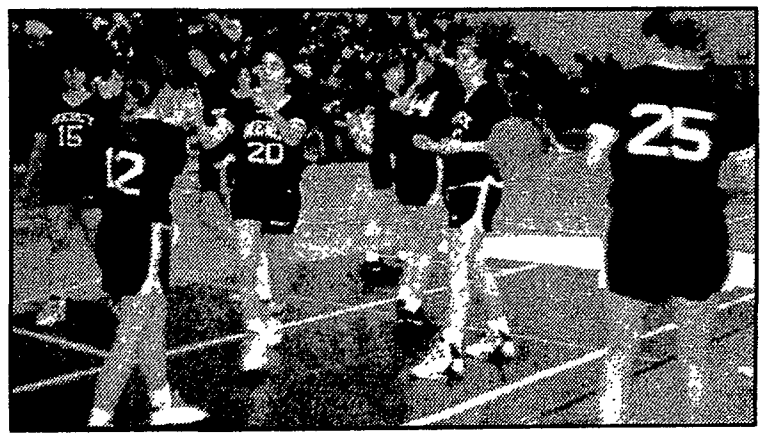
"That's why it's so important to keep the objective and subjective distinct," he commented. "From the church's point of view, it's terribly important that theologians not start messing up the objective tradition of the church."

Father Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, moral theology professor at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, praised Chapter 1 of the encyclical, which he described as "a use of Scripture that is almost poetic in its focus on the Gospel's newness vis-a-vis the law."

Especially in that section the encyclical itself reflects the collaboration of bishops and theologians since the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council called for renewal of moral theology, Father Kopfensteiner said.

"This document could not have been written 30 years ago," he said. "We couldn't possibly have had that first section before the council" because then Catholic theologians and authorities were unaccustomed to approaching moral issues from a biblical framework.

Mercy EDUCATING TODAY'S YOUNG WOMEN
FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD



**1993 Section V Champions
Mercy Monarchs**

Come and join our winning team!

Fall Open House
Thursday, October 21, 1993
7:00-9:00p.m.

Grades 7-12
288-7120

Our Lady of Mercy High School
1437 Blossom Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14610