

Synod groups seek equality in offices

VATICAN CITY — Every office in the Catholic Church not involving priestly ministry should be open to any qualified member of the church — male or female, clerical or lay, according to members of the world Synod of Bishops. Each of the synod's 14 small working groups called for greater involvement by women in decision-making positions and for the possibility of brothers serving as leaders in men's religious communities that include brothers and priests.

Trial abortion regimen not progress, official say

WASHINGTON — The finding that two currently prescribed drugs can be used together to cause abortions is far from medical progress, according to the head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. "As people in this nation clamor for an end to violence, medical scientists are offering yet another way to violently end the lives of children before they are born," said Gail Quinn, executive director of the pro-life secretariat.

Mexican army relents

MEXICO CITY — Government peace envoy Jorge Madrazo said the army will pull back its troops in the state of Chiapas to positions held when the shooting stopped in the insurrection which broke out on New Year's Day. The withdrawal is one element considered necessary for resuming peace talks. But he rejected the suggestion of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, who has been mediating the crisis, to form a peace commission.

Papal book offers reflections, hope

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In the first papal book aimed at a mass audience, Pope John Paul II makes a heartfelt plea against abortion, shares memories about growing up with Jewish friends and expresses optimism about the church's role in society.

Titled, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," the 244-page book was unveiled in Italy Oct. 19. Vatican and U.S. church leaders said it offered an unprecedented and fascinating window on the pope's thinking.

Written in response to questions from an Italian journalist during the last year, the volume was expected to be published in 21 languages in 35 countries, said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls. The U.S. publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, placed more than a million copies on sale Oct. 20.

The pope has earmarked royalties from the book, expected to total millions, for a special charity he has not yet named.

The papal reflections are philosophical and personal. Topics range from arguments for the existence of hell to the pontiff's attachment to a book of prayers his father once gave him. The pope's remarks on abortion cover only seven pages, but they are among the most impassioned and emphatic words in the book. He explains that in opposing abortion, the church is defending women against what is frequently an act of male selfishness. Often the man does not want to be burdened with a baby and leaves responsibility to the woman, "as if it were 'her fault' alone."

"In firmly rejecting 'pro-choice' it is necessary to become courageously 'pro-woman,' promoting a choice that is truly in favor of women," he says. The woman always pays the highest price, whether the result is motherhood or the suppression of the life of the conceived child, he says.

"The only honest stance, in these cases, is that of a radical solidarity with the woman. It is not right to leave her alone," he writes.

He also notes that the church's position is not one of "irresponsible global population growth" but of responsible parenthood.

New York Cardinal John J. O'Connor, speaking to reporters The pope's recollections of his boyhood focus on his friendship with Jerzy Kluger, a Jew from the pope's hometown, and on his many other Jewish acquaintances in pre-Holocaust Poland. The Nazis' attempted extermination of the Jews left an impression that has remained with him always, the pope relates.



AP/Wide World Photos
Tannie Shannon (left) carries his 11-month-old granddaughter, Andrea, as his family flees its flooded home four miles south of Conroe, Texas, Oct. 17. Flooding has driven at least 10,000 people from their homes in eastern Texas, and more rain is expected this week. Flood-relief donations may be sent to Catholic Charities USA-Texas Floods, 13331 Pennsylvania Ave., Hagerstown, MD 21742. Checks should be payable to Catholic Charities USA-Disaster Response. For information, call (703) 549-1390.

Death camps like those at Auschwitz still remind us that "anti-Semitism is a great sin against humanity," he says.

Much of the book deals with basic questions about religion, and the pope repeatedly stresses the importance of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. At the same time, however, he underlines what he sees as a basic difference between the salvation offered by Christianity and the more detached God of other religions.

In Islam, he writes, God is ultimately "outside of the world, a God who is only majesty, never Emmanuel." Nevertheless, he adds, Muslim religiosity is impressive. He contrasts the millions of Muslims who fall to their knees in prayer every day with Christians who "having deserted their magnificent cathedrals, pray only a little or not at all."

Some of the pope's most pointed comments come in response to the accusation that the church is out of touch with modern thinking on moral issues, especially sexual ethics.

Part of the problem, according to the pope, is that "the media have conditioned society to listen to what it wants to hear." Even worse, he says, is when moral theologians "ally themselves with the media" in opposing church doctrine.

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