

Vatican in spotlight as conference winds down

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

BEIJING — The first week of the U.N. women's conference ended with the Vatican outraged at what it saw as attempts to keep motherhood, religion and parental rights out of the final Beijing document.

"A minority coalition is vigorously blocking efforts" to include five important principles from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the Vatican spokesman, said Sept. 9.

In addition to religious freedom and parental rights, the Vatican wanted the final document to recognize the right to form a family, the right to special protection for motherhood and the "equal dignity" of women and men.

While the heads of the more than 180 delegations participating in the Sept. 4-15 conference made formal speeches in the plenary hall, their team members were negotiating the language of the final conference document in closed meetings.

The committees met throughout the Sept. 9-10 weekend and by Sept. 11, Navarro-Valls was in the conference press room proclaiming victory.

"My statement cleared the air" and forced several delegations, especially the European Union, to re-evaluate their positions on the five points, he said.

While many observers expected the main conference struggles to be over issues related to sexuality and reproduction, there appeared to be a general consensus that the Beijing document would simply repeat agreements on those areas reached at last year's U.N. conference on population in Cairo.

The only exception was a hotly contested reference in the Beijing draft to recognizing "sexual rights." The term was not defined, but groups lobbying for an end to discrimination against lesbians felt its inclusion was important.

While not opposing a recognition of the human rights of all people, the Vatican did not want homosexuality defined as a new human right.

"This is not a conference that has the ability to redefine universal human rights," Navarro-Valls said. Its purpose is "to reaffirm universal rights" as they apply to women.

U.N. spokeswoman Therese Gastaut said Sept. 11 that a consensus had been reached to accept a sentence saying: "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide



Mary Ann Glendon (left), head of the Vatican delegation to the conference on women, talks with delegate Janne Haaland Matlary of Norway (center) and Irene Kowalska of Poland prior to a Sept. 10 Mass at the Argentine Embassy in Beijing.

freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence."

In the contested draft document, the paragraph had begun: "Sexual rights include ..."

Navarro-Valls said the Vatican's pledge to stick with Cairo conference language

must be understood as including its reservations on the 1994 document's treatment of artificial contraception and abortion, which violate church teaching.

The Vatican, he said, pledged not to reopen the debate on those issues "so as to not block the process" of adopting a final document in Beijing.

"The question of the relationship of Beijing to Cairo is trivial in comparison to the relationship of Beijing to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Mary Ann Glendon, head of the Vatican delegation, told a Sept. 8 meeting of Catholic organizations observing the conference.

As one example, she said, the 1948 international declaration recognizes the fundamental importance of the family.

But in the Beijing draft, "marriage, motherhood and family tend to be presented as an impediment to women's self-fulfillment," she said.

The document includes a reference to the family as a theater of violence, which it unfortunately can be, Glendon said, adding the Vatican is "not romanticizing the family."

"But the family is also a theater in which we realize our potential to be brothers and sisters to each other, to give and receive love, to be good citizens," she said.

Pope plans message of justice for Africa visit

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II, visiting Africa for the 11th time this week, will bring along a new church document and a strong message of justice and hope to the ailing continent.

Billed as the ceremonial closing of last year's African synod, the Sept. 14-20 trip will take the pontiff to Cameroon, South Africa and Kenya. Previous visits focused mainly on local themes, but sources said the pope will raise broader issues on this trip — all connected to the church's future in African society.

A high point of the visit will be a three-day stop in South Africa, where the pope is expected to praise President Nelson Mandela's unity-building efforts and spotlight the post-apartheid society as one of the continent's success stories.

The pope said last week that his visit comes at an "important time of transformation and change" in South Africa.

In each country he will preside over an unusual "synod session" that includes not only bishops and others in the church's work force but a wide range of African leaders, including representatives of other religions, educators, politicians and artists.

The 1994 synod brought more than 170 African bishops to Rome for a month of pulse-taking and direction-setting, and participants said it marked the church's coming of age on the continent. But many Africans had wanted a synod on African soil, and the pope's visit aimed to partially satisfy that desire.

In Cameroon, his first stop, the pope is to unveil a 150-page apostolic exhortation based on the synod's final deliberations. Its themes will dominate his African speeches:

— The growing gap between rich and poor in the world and the need for economic justice, including the possibility of forgiving foreign debt that burdens so many African nations.

— The church's role in helping to stem the bloodshed on the continent, where ethnic conflicts and several civil wars still rage, and in halting the arms flow to Africa.

— Promotion of women's rights and education in African society and in the church.

— Massive refugee populations on the continent: causes and possible solutions.

— The extent to which Catholicism can find expression in African customs, particularly in reconciling the sacrament of marriage with traditional African mar-

riage forms.

The pope's message is expected to build on the success enjoyed by the church in Africa. From its missionary roots it has become the fastest-growing area of Catholicism in the world, with booming vocations, lively liturgies and vibrant small Christian communities.

A shadow that hangs over the trip, however, is the increasing strain in Catholic-Muslim relations in some parts of Africa. One problem, noted at the synod, is that well-financed Muslim fundamentalism is making inroads throughout the continent.

Church sources said the pope's message in South Africa will be an extremely positive assessment of the transition to a multiracial society.


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