

COLUMNISTS

Pope's message hits center of debate

The pope's visit to the United States three weeks ago was remarkable for its even happening. A year ago the pope suddenly canceled his plans to visit New York, New Jersey, and Baltimore, and to speak at the United Nations.

The last-minute nature of the cancellation led many at the time to speculate that the pope's health was much worse than the public had been told. After all, it was not a light matter for the pope to relinquish an opportunity to address the United Nations and also to disappoint one of his strongest and most loyal supporters in the hierarchy, Cardinal John O'Connor of New York.

That is why some observers concluded that John Paul II would never again touch down on U.S. soil. They were wrong.

Indeed, he continues to confound the pundits. Although he clearly shows the physical effects of the major medical problems he has endured in recent years, the pope keeps up a vigorous pace of travel and speech making with apparent strength and resiliency.

More important, however, than the mere fact of the recent visit is what he had to say to Americans.

The message was anything but boilerplate. He didn't simply repeat the lines that the media have come to expect him to highlight: about abortion, promiscu-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ous sexual activity, ordination of women, and similar issues that have given his pontificate a decidedly controversial character.

On the contrary, Pope John Paul II hit hard on social, economic, international, and moral themes that have been at the center of political debate in the United States for the last several years, and especially since the accession of the Republican majority to power in the U.S. Congress and the premature launching of the 1996 campaign for president.

Contrary to those American voices (including a few prominent Catholic politicians) who are calling for a return to isolationism, who scapegoat immigrants (even legal ones), and who blame the poor for their own plight, the pope gave a ringing endorsement to the United Nations on its 50th anniversary

and deplored the new mean-spirited attitude toward immigrants and the poor.

One paragraph in his U.N. speech encompassed all three issues: "The fact of 'difference' and the reality of 'the other,' can sometimes be felt as a burden, or even as a threat. Amplified by historic grievances and exacerbated by the manipulations of the unscrupulous, the fear of 'difference' can lead to a denial of the very humanity of 'the other' — with the result that people fall into a cycle of violence in which no one is spared, not even the children."

His words the same day at Giants Stadium in the New Jersey Meadowlands were tailored specifically for his American audience.

"Compared to many other parts of the world," he said, "the United States is a privileged, privileged land. Yet, even here there is much poverty and human suffering. There is much need for love and the works of love; there is need for social solidarity" marked by "a great openness and sensitivity to the needs of (one's) neighbors."

But, as in the U.N. speech, one paragraph stood out above the rest. Introducing the paragraph with a pointed reference to the Statue of Liberty and its world-famous invitation, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses ...," the pope deplored the

unpleasant turn in our political debate.

"Is present-day America," he asked, "becoming less sensitive, less caring toward the poor, the weak, the stranger, the needy? It must not! Today as before, the United States is called to be a hospitable, hospitable society, a welcoming culture. If America were to turn in on itself, would this not be the beginning of the end of what constitutes the very essence of the 'American experience?'"

No one familiar with the pope's commitment to Catholic social teaching could have been surprised by those words. In spite of his conservative management of the internal life of the church, he has always been a forthright advocate of social justice, human rights, and international responsibility.

Some of his most vocal supporters — including those with comfortable positions in private institutes funded by conservative foundations — have tended either to downplay his emphasis on social teaching or to put a conservative spin on it, situating the pope perhaps only a degree or two to the left of the Contract for America.

Conservative Catholics occasionally describe the practice of picking and choosing among the pope's teachings as "cafeteria Catholicism." If that's so, the cafeteria line has all types of Catholics in it.

Let's agree, and act, on Simpson outcome

What can we all agree upon regarding the O.J. Simpson trial?

Forget about the verdict. It has been well documented that people have strong feelings one way or the other. Many believe that Simpson is innocent and had been framed; others, that he is guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt;" still others, that he deserved to be found not guilty either because the prosecution failed to prove its case or because prosecution witnesses perjured themselves.

All of us, no matter what our opinion on the verdict, must accept the fact that we will never agree. True judgment, as always, remains with God.

Is there anything coming out of this trial, then, that we can agree upon now? Anything on which all men and



faith & work

By GREGORY F. AUGUSTINE PIERCI

women of good will can commit themselves to immediate, concerted, joint action?

Surprisingly, there are at least two things.

The first is that domestic violence — the kind described so graphically throughout the Simpson case — is always wrong and that the victims of domestic violence have a right and deserve to be protected.

The second is that there is absolutely no place in any police department or law enforcement agency in the country for people who hold racist views or discriminate against or harass people on the basis of their race or ethnic background.

Don't you agree with those two ideas? Almost everyone whose opinion you would respect does. Seldom in our national history have we achieved that kind of unanimity. Our task is to turn our agreement into effective action.

Now is the time for churches, synagogues and mosques, community organizations, labor unions, businesses, politicians and government officials, political parties and national organizations of all kinds to come together across racial, ethnic, gender, economic, geographic and all other kinds of lines. We need to stop arguing about whether O.J. Simpson was guilty or not and demand that — at least on these two issues upon which we all agree — there be immediate and substantial changes in our society.

If we are successful in this effort, then perhaps this trial, which captured our attention and appeared to divide us, may ultimately result in bringing us back together.

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