

WORLD & NATION

Synod focuses on justice, respect for native peoples

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Synod of Bishops for America wound up its speech-giving phase with strong calls for economic justice, personal holiness and respect for indigenous peoples.

As in the first week of the assembly, the synod discussion Nov. 24-30 ranged across a full spectrum of issues, from ecumenical dialogue in the United States to voodoo practices in Haiti.

But the synod also began to take focus. Bishops began meeting in small groups to synthesize their findings and draw up recommendations. They started work on propositions to be presented to Pope John Paul II and a message to the world at the assembly's conclusion Dec. 12.

The pope continued to preside personally over the general sessions, listening as bishops gave eight-minute speeches and occasionally reacting with a comment or his own applause.

The pontiff appeared especially interested in talks on native Americans and their 500-year experience with the church. The most dramatic of these speeches was delivered Nov. 27 by Harry LaFond, head of the Muskeg Lake Indian tribe in Saskatchewan.

Addressing the pope as "grandfather" — an Indian term of respect — he said early evangelization of native peoples in the Americas was linked to "an unconscious European imperialism."

"The end result was that, by contact with the church and with the Christian culture, the aboriginal peoples suffered many losses in terms of their languages, their culture and family lives, and their own spiritual traditions. This relationship needs to be radically reassessed," he said.

The pope, who had hosted LaFond at

dinner the evening before, joined those who applauded the speech.

Bishop Donald E. Pelotte of Gallup, N.M., a Native American, touched on similar issues. He said that because evangelization took place in the context of European settlement, many indigenous Americans remain ambivalent about Christianity, and many others reject it completely.

In order to be credible and to evangelize successfully among Native Americans, the church must join them in their struggles for justice, apologize for past mistakes, respect their culture and call forth indigenous church leaders, the bishop said.

"Everywhere on our continent indigenous peoples suffer the worst neglect and impoverishment of any population," he said.

Similar calls for special solidarity with indigenous peoples were made by bishops from Canada, Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia and Brazil. Bishop Erwin Krautler of Xingu, Brazil, told the assembly that deforestation and exploitation of the Amazon forest region is continuing to bring ruin to native peoples, and said: "If destruction continues at the current rate, we will be saying the 'Requiem' for Amazonia in just a couple of decades."

Economic issues — poverty, foreign debt, globalized market structures — continued to loom large at the synod.

Mary Ann Glendon, a U.S. professor and member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, summarized the problem for the synod: "In recent years, the affluent countries seem to be washing their hands of the problems of poor people and poor countries. What attention they pay to the marginalized is increasingly in the form of aggressive population control programs."

Saying that it is often "the church and only the church" that promotes human val-



CNS/Arturo Man

Pope John Paul II joins bishops from North and South American at the Synod for America at the Vatican. Latin America's foreign debt, North America's growing secularism, poverty, injustice and scarcity of priests were some of the issues discussed during the first week of proceedings, Nov. 24-30.

ues over profit, she urged a particular focus on the fate of women and girls under the current economic order.

Bishops from Bolivia, Honduras, Peru and Jamaica denounced the effects of globalization, a process they said has generally made the rich richer and the poor poorer, and which has introduced what one bishop called a "consumerist pseudo-culture" in Latin America. Several more bishops called for complete or partial forgiveness of the foreign debt owed by poor nations.

But the most detailed critique of globalization came from Canadian Archbishop Henri Goudreault of Grouard-McLennan, Alberta. He cited the generous benefits given multinational corporations by governments, the huge increase in purely speculative international transactions, and the high cost being paid in areas of employment, ecology, resources and culture.

Part of the solution, he said, was for governments to "stop being puppets in the hands of financial giants."

U.S. Cardinal Edmund C. Szoka, who administers Vatican City State, had something good to say about globalization. Although driven mainly by greed, he said, global economic policies increase the sense of world interdependence and should eventually improve global living standards. The church should welcome globalization as an evangelization opportunity, he said.

Colombian Archbishop Ivan Marin-Lopez of Popayan proposed that as a concrete sign of solidarity with the poor, bishops and priests should donate half of their personal property to a Catholic charity by the year 2000.

The synod debate was not only — or even primarily — about economic and justice issues, however. Many participants highlighted more spiritual and pastoral questions that they saw as crucial to the church's future in the Western hemisphere.

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York spoke about the importance of the Eucharist as the driving force behind the church's social justice campaigns. He called for a new "eucharistic crusade" to bring people back to Sunday Mass.

Mercy Sister Mary Quentin Sheridan, secretary of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, said attacks on the Catholic priesthood, along with "the endless dispute about celibacy," had had an eroding effect on the entire church. But she said World Youth Day celebrations had helped restore a new energy.

Several professional catechists, addressing the synod as auditors, spoke of the need to renew Catholic education and make it more Christ-centered, Bible-oriented and life-related.

Others emphasized the role of the laity and said the bishops should highlight the past witness of lay people in the Americas, strengthen collaborative avenues between laity and clergy, improve formation programs and encourage lay Catholics to carry the Gospel message into areas of politics and social action.

Speaking on ecumenism, Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore said the church must continue to heal the wounds caused by the division of Christian churches, even though the "ecumenical journey is not an easy one."

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