

WORLD & NATION

Panelists decry growth of papal centralization

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Catholic theologians identified the way bishops are selected as one key issue during an American Academy of Religion seminar on how the papacy might better serve Christian unity.

Several panelists criticized increased centralization of the church under Pope John Paul II. They argued for application of the principle of subsidiarity — limited exercise of higher authority in local affairs — to the church's internal life.

Scott Appleby, a history professor and director of the University of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center, said a major problem today is "the Romanization of the American hierarchy as the Vatican's response to a major crisis in Catholic self-understanding and to the de-centering process which has ensued within the church."

He found strong parallels between the present papal strategy and that of Pope Pius X, who in the early 1900s appointed bishops closely aligned to Roman views to combat perceived dangers of modernism and Americanism in the U.S. church.

Retired Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco — whose 1996 Oxford lecture on the exercise of papal primacy for Christian unity set the seminar's framework — said Pope John Paul II's 1995 invitation to others to suggest how exercise of the papal office might be changed to meet present-day needs was "an extremely courageous, imaginative, groundbreaking act."

John F. Kane, former chairman of religious studies at Regis University in Denver, said that among the ideas Archbishop Quinn raised at Oxford, "it seems to me that the most important specific reform he refers to is reform in the process of selecting bishops. Without that reform, every other element of reform he talks to, it seems to me, is moot."

Other issues raised by panelists included how the Roman Curia operates, the role of women in the church, the role of bishops and the meaning of collegiality in church governance, and what discernment of God's will means — not only for the papacy, but for everyone in the church.

The seminar, held in San Francisco Nov. 22 during the academy's annual convention, drew about 150 people, said moderator Phyllis Zagano of Boston University, co-chair of the academy's Roman Catholic

Studies Group.

Zagano said in her opening remarks that Archbishop Quinn's Oxford lecture in June 1996 "has possibly caused more, and more serious, comment on the exercise of the (papal) primacy than any other single entry into the dialogue. It is a strong and deliberate, wholly honest and respectful examination of the current state of the papacy as it affects the wonderful project of the church in this century."

In a telephone interview afterward Archbishop Quinn told Catholic News Service that the text of his lecture has been translated and published in major European and other languages, including Vietnamese and Chinese recently.

Other panelists at the two-and-a-half-hour seminar were St. Joseph Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, a theologian at Fordham University in New York; Jesuit Father Thomas Rausch, chairman of religious studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles; and Wendy Wright, a professor of spirituality at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

Sister Johnson said one point in the Oxford lecture that stood out in her mind "is the understanding that episcopal collegiality makes bishops not near-managers under the direction of the pope, but genuine bearers of a shared mission from Christ in collaboration with the bishop of Rome."

Father Rausch said he agreed with most of the points raised by Archbishop Quinn at Oxford. But he questioned one — the idea of convoking an ecumenical council to start the new millennium.

Because Pope John Paul, he said, has selected bishops for the past 18 years based on loyalty to Roman views, he said, "I do not think the time is ripe for calling an ecumenical council."

In his response to the panelists, Archbishop Quinn said that the issue of discerning God's will raised by Wright "is ultimately the most important point of all in the search for Christian unity."

He said the willingness to follow God's will "is impossible without serious and prolonged prayer. That is why the ultimate condition of Christian unity will be found in the determination of Christians to pray, and to pray in a truly contemplative way."

He also warned that criticism of church structures must arise out of loyalty to the church. "Otherwise it is elitist arrogance and a form of unbelief," he said.

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