

COLUMNISTS

Bishop's call for reconciliation raises issues

The end of a year and the beginning of another are apt occasions for reviewing the quality of our relationships, and for seeing if there is a need for healing and reconciliation.

The president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Anthony Pilla of Cleveland, sounded this theme in his address at the recent bishops' meeting in Washington.

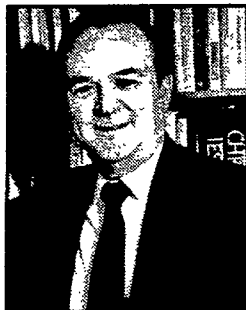
"As we approach the millennium jubilee," he said, "the church is being called to a spirit of repentance and reconciliation. The Holy Father who has, many times now, asked forgiveness of those who have been harmed by some of the church's actions serves as our model in responding to this call."

Bishop Pilla pointed out that "a church which lacks within a spirit of reconciliation can hardly confront the forces of division that obscure humanity's sense of unity. A church which is not at peace with itself acts as a counter-sign."

He identified three areas where there is a need for reconciliation within the church itself.

The first concerns "the way in which some public discussion of issues takes place in the church." He referred to "some angry voices" who use a "rhetoric of violence toward whoever disagrees with them."

He fittingly appealed to Pope Benedict XV's first encyclical ("Appeal for peace," November 1914) as the kind of



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essays in theology

healing leadership the church needs to bring this nasty infighting to a halt.

What Bishop Pilla did not acknowledge is that the problem that Benedict sought to correct was largely created by Benedict's predecessor, Pius X. It was Pius X who created the atmosphere of mutual suspicion and recrimination in the church by his intemperate campaign against Catholic scholars and by his approval of a secret society (the Sodalitium Pianum) to spy on Catholic scholars and to report them to Rome.

Reputable Catholic historians recognize that Pius X's policies set back the cause of Catholic scholarship for nearly half a century. We are still feeling the effects of those policies today.

The second area in need of reconciliation, Bishop Pilla observed, concerns "those who have been in any way hurt by ministers of the church, especially clergy."

"We bishops," he said, "regret deeply

the harm that has been done to children and young people and which remains with them in adulthood. For those who wish to accept it, we offer them our pastoral care and concern; and for the sake of their peace of mind and that of all Catholics, we pledge our continuing and constant vigilance in preventing such abuse in the future."

What the bishop did not acknowledge is that the U.S. bishops still do not have a national policy on this matter because of resistance within the episcopal conference itself.

Nor did he acknowledge that what most victims and their families resent almost as much as the original acts of misconduct is the church's posture of stonewalling, of withholding evidence, of misstating facts, and even of attacking the victims and their families, as if they were primarily to blame.

Recent jury verdicts against the Catholic dioceses of Dallas, Texas, and Bridgeport, Conn., disclosed that jurors were more disturbed by the church's cover-up than they were by the behavior of obviously troubled and dysfunctional priests.

Why, then, do bishops continue to allow defense lawyers to fashion hard-line responses to every charge against the church, without any apparent input from their own pastoral hearts and sense of justice and compassion? (Anyone familiar with the legal system knows that the job of defense attorneys

is to shield the client, whether guilty or not; the search for truth and justice has little to do with it.)

The third area in need of reconciliation, Bishop Pilla noted, concerns "the polarization which takes place around matters of doctrine or at least authoritative teaching." But here the bishop's solution is strangely one-sided.

While conceding that mean and even hateful rhetoric comes from both sides, the bishop seems to believe that the only way reconciliation can come about in this third area is through the complete capitulation of those who are critical of, or in disagreement with, one or another church teaching. The unstated assumption is that every church teaching, whether infallibly taught or not, must be accepted as if infallibly taught.

This is a wholly untraditional view, and offers no explanation for the many non-infallible church teachings (on usury, on religious freedom, on the authority of the pope over the temporal realm) that later had to be corrected. Some dissenters, in other words, have been proven right; it was the official teaching that was wrong.

Bishop Pilla is to be congratulated for using the platform of his presidential office to raise these important issues.

A happy new year to all.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.



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wishes you and yours a safe and
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Merry Christmas

