

WORLD & NATION

Pope details bishops' conferences' authority

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Bishops' conferences may issue statements on moral and other doctrinal matters only if they pass with a unanimous vote or receive the prior approval of the Vatican, Pope John Paul II said.

In an apostolic letter on "The Theological and Juridical Nature of Episcopal Conferences," released July 23 at the Vatican, the pope said any authority national bishops' conferences have is delegated to them or flows from their unity with the pope and the universal College of Bishops.

Pope John Paul praised bishops' conferences as expressions of the unity of the church and as effective means for the bishops of a nation or region to promote and defend the faith.

But, the pope said, in responding to new doctrinal issues and moral concerns being raised in their nations, the members of a conference must recognize the limits of their pronouncements.

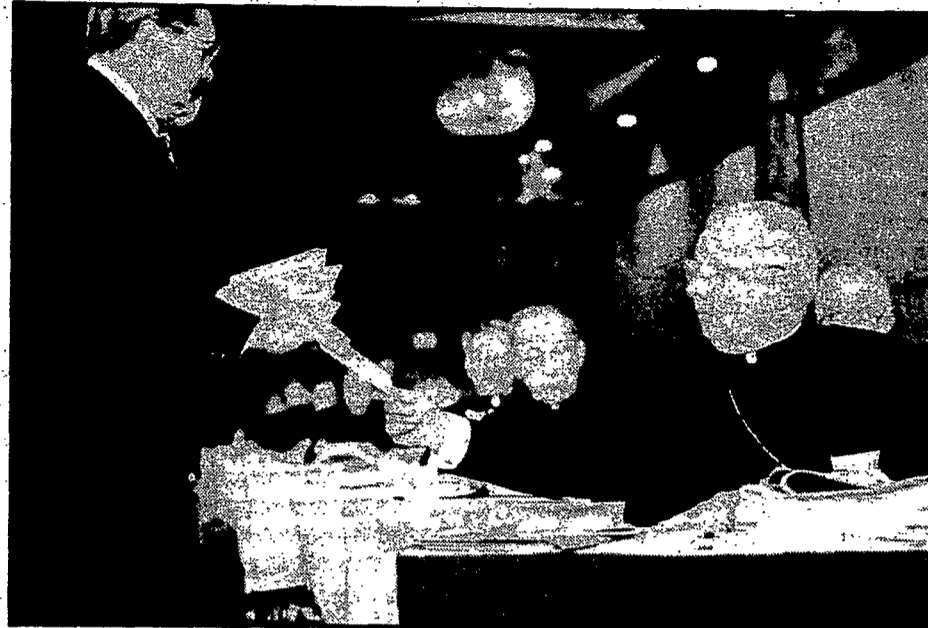
"The authentic magisterium of the bishops, namely what they teach insofar as they are invested with the authority of Christ, must always be in communion" with the head of the Catholic Church and the members of the worldwide College of Bishops, he said.

The pope said caution also must be taken to ensure that conference statements do not unwittingly interfere with pronouncements on the same subject being developed by other national bishops' conferences.

"When the doctrinal declarations of episcopal conferences are approved unanimously, they may certainly be issued in the name of the conferences themselves, and the faithful are obliged to adhere with a sense of religious respect," the pope wrote.

"However, if this unanimity is lacking," he said, "a majority alone of the bishops of a conference cannot issue a declaration as authentic teaching of the conference to which all the faithful of the territory would have to adhere, unless it obtains the 'recognitio' (approval) of the Apostolic See, which will not give it if the majority requesting it is not substantial."

A substantial majority is two-thirds of the active members of a bishops' conference, the pope said in the norms for implementing the document.



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A bishop casts his ballot on a matter before the U.S. bishops' conference at a meeting last November in Washington. Pope John Paul II said in an apostolic letter July 23 that bishops' conferences may only issue statements on moral or other doctrinal matters with a unanimous vote or with prior Vatican approval.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told reporters July 23 that requiring unanimity or at least a large majority respects and protects the minority.

"Here we are not talking about practical, disciplinary questions on which, in the end, a majority must make a decision. We are talking about doctrinal questions regarding the truth," Cardinal Ratzinger said. "The principle of the majority ends where the principle of truth begins. Truth is not determined by a majority vote."

The papal norms apply only to pastoral letters and declarations issued in the name of the entire conference, the cardinal said. When the bylaws of a bishops' conference allow conference committees or commissions to publish statements in their own name, the practice can continue as long as people understand the statements have no binding authority, he said.

Committees and commissions may not issue statements in the name of the entire conference, he said. Such statements become the work of the entire conference only when all eligible conference members have studied and voted on them.

Cardinal Ratzinger used as an example the U.S. bishops' Committee on Marriage

and Family's 1997 pastoral message "Always Our Children," which was addressed to the parents of homosexual children.

In assigning the statement to a committee, he said, "perhaps the American bishops did well by not immediately raising it to the level of the entire conference, which would have required a response of religious assent" on the part of U.S. Catholics.

As a committee statement, he said, the message "remains, so to speak, on an experimental, provisional level" and gives bishops, theologians and Catholics more time to build a consensus.

"I think this document, in itself, is not doctrinal in the strict sense, but the pas-

toral problems touched in it have such a pastoral and doctrinal sensitivity that if the entire conference had been speaking, I personally would have thought immediately" that the new papal norm calling for unanimity or Vatican approval would have applied, Cardinal Ratzinger said.

The cardinal and Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of the doctrinal congregation, said other topics of possible bishops' statements needing unanimity or Vatican approval from now on would include national catechisms and pastoral letters dealing with sexual morality or bioethics.

In his letter, Pope John Paul said that in most cases bishops' conferences live up to the reason for which they were established: "as a means of responding to different ecclesiastical questions of common interest and finding appropriate solutions to them."

At the same time, he said, bishops' conferences cannot usurp the authority, which by "divine institution," an individual bishop has in governing his own diocese.

The decisions of a bishops' conference have no "binding effect" on an individual bishop unless they are approved by the Vatican or the Vatican has delegated specific authority to the conference over the matter, he said.

"In the episcopal conference, the bishops jointly exercise the episcopal ministry for the good of the faithful of the territory of the conference," the pope wrote.

"But, for that exercise to be legitimate and binding on the individual bishops, there is needed the intervention of the supreme authority of the church which, through universal law or particular mandates, entrusts determined questions to the deliberation of the episcopal conference," he said.

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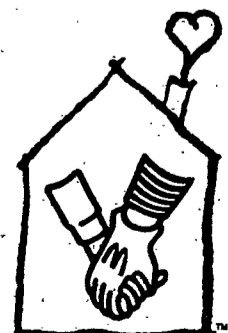


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Suspect arrested for murder of women religious in Yemen

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II offered condolences to the relatives of three Missionaries of Charity shot to death in Yemen, as well as to members of their order and the religious community.

In two July 28 telegrams, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican secretary of state, said the pope was "deeply saddened" by the previous day's shooting in Hodeida, Yemen.

A lone man with an automatic rifle killed the three nuns outside their residence near a social service center for the disabled where they worked.

Police arrested a suspect, Abdullah al-Nashri, 25, who confessed to the shooting. Authorities described him as unstable and said he had been treated at the nuns' center.

In a message to Sister Nirmala, head of the India-based order founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul expressed "heartfelt condolences to you and to the whole institute," said Cardinal Sodano.

"Invoking upon the deceased the abundant reward of their missionary labors, he prays that their supreme sacrifice will help to further the cause of interreligious

understanding and esteem," the telegram said.

A separate message to Bishop Giovanni Bernardo Gremoli of Arabia expressed the pope's sympathy to the bishop, the religious community and the families of the deceased sisters.

The bishop and Sister Nirmala reportedly were to attend funeral services for the three nuns.

The victims were two Indians, Sister Tilia and Sister Anetta, and Sister Michael, who was from the Philippines.

The Missionaries of Charity social service center treats about 100 people from Hodeida, about 140 miles west of the Yemeni capital Sanaa, and the surrounding region. It was founded in 1973.

The Missionaries of Charity operate four centers for the elderly and the disabled in Yemen.

Yemen's minister of health visited the order's house in Sanaa to convey the government's condolences and requested that the country's ministry of the interior provide additional security for nuns working in Yemen.

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh promised he would direct an investigation into the incident.