

**Voice**

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**Golden anniversary**

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the UN declaration on human rights, and the Diocese of Rochester is currently exploring ways of commemorating its adoption, according to Suzanne Schnitman, diocesan consistent life ethic coordinator. In conjunction with the diocese's plans to celebrate the church's Jubilee Year 2000, she said, diocesan officials are currently discussing organizing support for the relief of debt incurred by poor nations, a goal supported by both the U.S. Catholic Conference and Pope John Paul II.

The UN declaration's anniversary was also the focus of more than 1,000 religious orders' leaders who met in Milwaukee, Wis., from Aug. 20 to 23, for a joint conference of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM).

Among those who attended the conference were Sister Curtis' superior, Sister Sheila Stevenson, and Sister Janice Morgan, SSI, congregational vice president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester.

According to documents provided by Sister Stevenson and Sister Morgan, the conference examined a wide range of human rights issues, and the leaders ended the conference by issuing a joint statement listing ways U.S. religious can promote human rights, including:

Developing human rights oriented TV programs and advertising campaigns.

Concentrating religious personnel and resources in the the poorest U.S. cities.

Promoting a dialogue on injustice within the church itself.

In addition, the leaders passed resolutions condemning the U.S. bombings of alleged terrorist sites in Sudan and Afghanistan. They also supported a national health care policy that would ensure adequate and affordable health care for all, as well as efforts to protect the human rights of immigrants.

According to Father Ted Keating, SM, director for justice and peace for the CMSM, conference workshops examined

such issues as racism and sexism, religious orders and now they support or oppose unions, and how the church can better witness to human rights in the world.

"We perceive the issue of human rights as central to mission," he said in a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his Maryland office.

**Reaching for rights**

During his 1944 Christmas address, Pope Pius XII noted that the Second World War had created a huge hunger for democracy and liberty among the peoples of the world tired of oppressive leaders who had led them into war.

"(T)he peoples have, as it were, awakened from a long torpor," the pontiff said. "They have assumed, in relation to the State and those who govern, a new attitude — one that questions, criticizes, distrusts."

The pope predicted that the end of the war would produce a worldwide desire for liberty, a desire that was eventually embodied on Dec. 10, 1948, when the UN General Assembly unanimously approved the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The declaration brought together a variety of principles that had gradually gained acceptance throughout the world in the preceding centuries through such documents as the U.S. Constitution.

"(I)t is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law," the declaration's preamble states.

Among the many rights it enumerates in its 30 articles, the UN declaration calls for all nations to respect everyone's right to life, liberty, security, freedom of movement, a voice in his or her government, work and rest, assembly, education, health care and property.

The declaration also banned torture, degrading treatment, inhuman punishment and slavery.

**Spectrum of response**

Sister Stevenson pointed out that service and advocacy go hand-in-hand in the church's human rights work. In particular, she noted that religious orders originally founded to directly serve the poor by providing health care and education

are now including political and social advocacy as part of their mission.

"Education, health care, economic opportunities; these are the kinds of things men and women need equal access to (in order to have) what rightfully is part of our humanness," she said.

Sister Morgan echoed Sister Stevenson's view. She pointed out that members of her order have done everything from provide health care to inner-city residents in Rochester to performing civil disobedience against nuclear weapons at Seneca Army Depot. Such seemingly disparate activities actually all go back to Christ's call for all to love one another, she emphasized.

"Our charism is to serve the neighbor without distinction," she said of her order.

And Catholics seem to be serving plenty of neighbors. From El Salvador to Poland, China to Guatemala, and all points in between, Catholics — religious, clergy and lay workers — have been harassed, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed because of their work for human rights.

Even in the United States, seen by many as the country most hospitable to human rights, individuals moved by Catholic principles — including many from this diocese — have done prison time for civil disobedience against various institutions including clinics that perform abortions, welfare offices that fingerprint recipients and at military institutions such as the School of the Americas (SOA) in Georgia, which has trained military personnel from nations with poor human rights records.

Sister Curtis noted that she has worked with her order to organize letter-writing campaigns to the federal government against the SOA, which has graduated dozens of Latin American human rights violators. A call to close the school was among the resolutions passed at the Milwaukee leadership conference.

Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester have long been involved in other human rights efforts as well. Corpus Christi Church in Rochester, for example, has sent parishioners and staff members to El Salvador, Haiti and Mexico to support poor people suffering the ill effects of government oppression and poverty.

Earlier this year, St. Thomas the Apostle Church hosted a series of speeches by Catherine Ho, a Chinese Catholic exile who had been imprisoned by her native

country's communist government for belonging to the Legion of Mary.

And churches like St. Stanislaus and St. George's, both in Rochester, have provided aid to Catholics who suffered under communist rule in Poland and Lithuania respectively.

**Link between worlds**

The broad array of such activities is familiar to David Hinkley who has worked for both the church and human rights. Hinkley is currently directing the national campaign to celebrate the UN declaration's 50th anniversary for the New York City-based Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute.

A former Catholic school teacher, Hinkley is on leave from his position as Catholic Charities social justice director for the Diocese of Santa Rosa, Calif., and is also a former chairman of the International Council of Amnesty International, the well-known human rights group.

The Catholic Church is a profoundly important human rights advocate both here in the United States and abroad, Hinkley said. In a number of countries, Catholics have been on both sides, either squashing human rights or being victimized in the process. Because the church eschews violence, it generally has a credible human rights voice, he added. This has allowed the church to both fight for human rights and serve as a conciliator when civilian governments replace military dictatorships, he said.

Domestically, he added, the U.S. church has been one of the few voices supporting immigrants and the homeless in this country in recent years. Meanwhile, he credited Pope John Paul II and Catholic leaders in Eastern Europe, the Philippines, Indonesia and West Africa for standing up against tyrannical governments during the 1980s and 1990s.

"The church works with the poor, and the poor are often the most oppressed," he said. "Therefore the church is in a unique situation to document what's happening to the poor."

Sister Curtis saw the church's human rights advocate role as one of its most important in the world.

"I think the world needs and wants voices that uphold human rights, and I think that's where the church's leadership needs to be," she said.

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