

WORLD & NATION

Pope's birthday Mass largest concelebrated

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II blended celebrations of his 80th birthday with the Vatican's Jubilee for Priests, emphasizing the primacy of his priestly vocation in his life.

Though showered with greetings from political leaders and cultural icons from around the world, treated to a special London Philharmonia musical performance and feted with a sumptuous lunch, the pope seemed most pleased with some 8,000 priests concelebrating his birthday Mass May 18.

During the liturgy in St. Peter's Square, which Vatican officials called the largest concelebrated Mass in history, the pope said God "desired to link my existence to the grace of the priestly ministry, as bishop and successor of Peter, to be a witness of God's love for all humanity in these, our times, which are so fascinating."

He returned to his reflections on the priesthood at a birthday lunch with cardinals after the Mass, saying, "I am particularly happy to remember my birthday in this priestly dimension, which is the fundamental one of my life."

In his Mass homily, the pope praised God for the gift of priesthood, which he called a gift of love for all mankind. But he also acknowledged the struggles and weaknesses of ordinary priests and the growing threat of a priest shortage.

He asked for prayers for priests who have left the ministry and encouraged fallen-away priests to seek laicization, a Vatican dispensation officially releasing them from priestly duties.

"I think also of those priests who, for different circumstances, no longer exer-

cise the sacred ministry, though they continue to hold in themselves a special configuration to Christ through the indelible character of holy orders," the pope said.

Interrupted by applause, he said, "I also pray a great deal for them, and I invite everyone to remember them in prayer, so that, thanks also to a procedurally obtained dispensation," they remain committed Christians in communion with the church.

The pope said that priests must guide the church "not with force but with cheerfulness, not with the attitude of masters but by offering an exemplary witness."

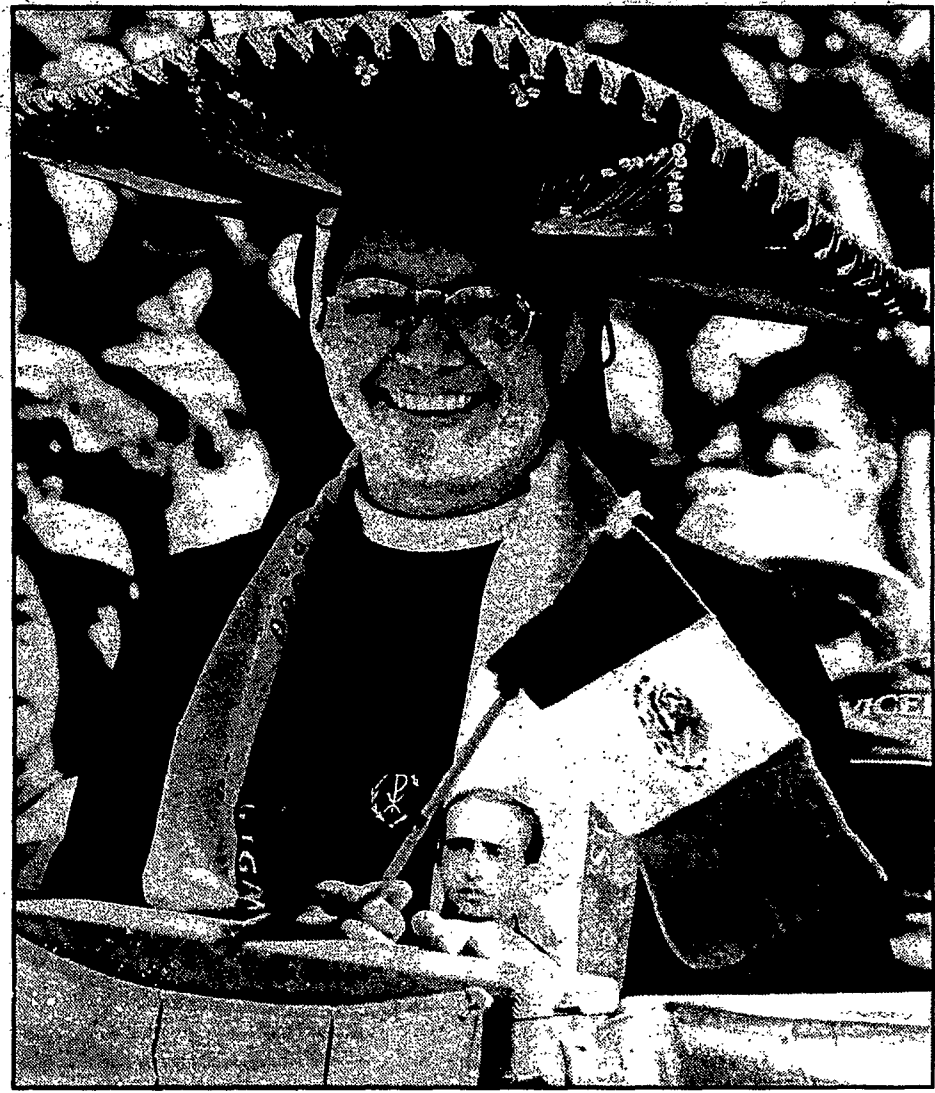
Greeting priests during an evening prayer service May 17 in St. Peter's Square, the pope said the church in the 20th century was rich with the witness of saintly priests, some of whom even shed their blood exercising their ministry.

"Let us follow their footsteps, because the efficacy of our ministry depends on (saintliness)," he said.

During the May 14-18 Jubilee for Priests, two female saints were proposed as inspirations for priests seeking to faithfully live their vocations amid the challenges of the modern world.

In two different turbulent eras in the church, Sts. Catherine of Siena and Therese of Lisieux "knew how to speak to priests to stimulate them to live their vocations to the highest," said Cardinal Lucas Moreira Neves, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, at a Mass May 17 in St. Peter's Basilica.

The liturgy was followed by a two-hour meditation on the saints' interaction with priests.



Paul Hanna/CNSReuters

Mexican saints

Donning a sombrero and holding the Mexican flag, a nun attends the canonization of 27 Mexicans in St. Peter's Square May 21. Of those proclaimed saints, two are founders of religious orders and the rest martyrs of Mexico's anti-Catholic persecution.

Uninsured

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Income level is no guarantee of obtaining health insurance, either. Nearly half (44 percent) of uninsured Americans had family incomes more than twice the federal poverty level, which for a family of three in 1998 was \$27,300. More than a quarter (27 percent) had family incomes above 300 percent of the poverty level, or \$40,950.

Most of the nation's 11.9 million uninsured children (55 percent) come from two-parent families, and more than three-quarters come from families with at least one full-time worker.

The major reasons given by uninsured adults for not having health insurance is that it is too expensive (cited by 74 percent), coverage is not offered on the job (48 percent), the person is between jobs or unemployed (36 percent), or coverage has been refused (23 percent).

The problem of the uninsured is seen as a paradox by those who study the nation's leading economic indicators.

"The 1990s was a spectacular decade on a lot of fronts," said Robert Reischauer, president of the Urban Institute and former director of the Congressional Budget Office, at the Kaiser briefing May 16.

"We ended the Cold War, balanced the budget, got unemployment down to

record lows, crime rates were lower, the welfare rolls were down," Reischauer said. "The one exception was health insurance coverage."

Diane Rowland, executive director of the Kaiser commission, said that without the Medicaid expansion of the 1990s, the situation would have been even more bleak, with at least 10 million more uninsured Americans.

"Medicaid, and now the State Children's Health Insurance Program, can play a critical role in improving coverage for the low-income population," Rowland said. "These data emphasize that all avenues for reaching the uninsured should be pursued."

Children's Health Matters, a coalition of many Catholic hospitals and Catholic Charities agencies, has taken on the job of increasing awareness of the eligibility requirements for Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, and removing obstacles to families enrolling their children in health care.

"The local members of Children's Health Matters see the families of uninsured Medicaid and SCHIP eligible chil-

dren in their programs, clinics and hospitals on a daily basis," said Lisa Atchison Smith, director of Children's Health Matters. "By working together, they can persuade state and local authorities to simplify applications for programs and permit enrollment at Catholic hospitals, Catholic Charities agencies, and other health and social service agencies."

In its annual report for 1999, released May 15, Children's Health Matters reported that 47,939 families had been assisted in completing applications for Medicaid and SCHIP; more than 3,100 service providers had been trained to provide such assistance; and more than 1.1 million applications, brochures and other promotional materials had been distributed.

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