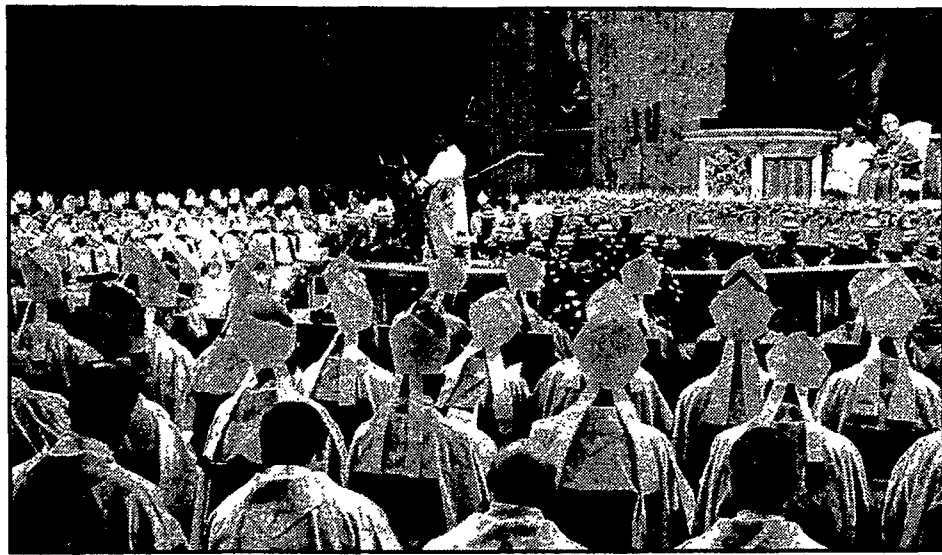


WORLD & NATION



Reuters/CNS

Bishops meet in Rome

Bishops from around the world gather in St. Peter's Basilica with Pope John Paul II for Mass opening the monthlong Synod of Bishops Sept. 30. About 250 bishops from 110 countries were meeting for talks on the role of the bishop.

Vatican offers support for U.S. war

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ASTANA, Kazakstan— As Pope John Paul II made a four-day visit to Central Asia, the Vatican appeared to signal a wider — though still qualified — margin of support for eventual U.S. military action against terrorists around the globe.

The pope's own pronouncements during his Sept. 22-25 stay in Kazakstan were consistent with his previous warnings against a retaliation taken in "vengeance" or any armed intervention that could deepen divisions in the world.

But statements by papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls indicated that the Vatican would understand if the United States decided to go after terrorists in "self-defense," especially if it meant warding off future attacks.

Navarro-Valls said his comments were designed to make clear that the pope cannot be considered a "pacifist at all costs" nor a military "interventionist."

They also showed that the Vatican views the need to combat terrorism in a different category from previous U.S.-led war efforts, such as the Gulf War of 1991 or the war against Yugoslavia in 1999.

In an interview Sept. 24 with the British news agency Reuters, Navarro-Valls said the pope understands the "difficulties of a political leader who has to respond to such issues" in the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

"It is certain that if someone has done great harm to society, and there is a danger that if he remains free he may be able to do it again, you have the right to apply self-defense for the society which you lead, even though the means you may choose may be aggressive," Navarro-Valls said.

"Sometimes it is more prudent to act rather than to be passive. In this sense, the pope is not a pacifist, because one must remember that in the name of peace, even some horrible injustices can be carried out," he said.

"Sometimes self-defense implies an action which may lead to the death of a person," he said.

Navarro-Valls said that "either people who have carried out a horrendous crime are put in a position where they can do no further harm, by being handed over and put into custody, or the principle of self-defense applies with all its consequences."

His statement appeared tailor-made to apply to the U.S. demand that Afghanistan hand over Osama bin Laden, suspected as a guiding hand behind the Sept. 11 suicide hijackings in the United States.

Navarro-Valls was careful to recall that church teaching requires that armed response be proportionate to the threat and that innocent people not be harmed in the

process. He also stressed that "eventual action must be directed against terrorism and not against Islam."

But while the church places a very high value on peace, he said, "the common good ... is sometimes above it." The important thing is that those trying to carry out justice do not end up causing another injustice, he said. The spokesman was giving voice to a strong current of thought among Vatican officials, who do not want the pope's frequent appeals against war to be seen as an endorsement of peace at any price — especially in the wake of the monstrous acts committed against the United States.

The sensitivity of the issue inside the Vatican was evident by the manner in which Navarro-Valls chose to make his comments.

The day before, the pope told a mixed Muslim and Christian audience in Kazakstan that "we must not let what has happened lead to a deepening of divisions" and said, "I beg God to keep the world in peace."

Especially in Central Asia, the pope's words seemed to echo widespread apprehension about U.S. military action in the region and the potential consequences around the globe.

The Vatican spokesman waited a day, then made his carefully chosen remarks about the legitimacy of self-defense. Afterward, neither he nor other Vatican officials were available for elaboration, leaving a large corps of journalists wondering just how the Vatican position had evolved.

In the 1991 Gulf War, the pope was perhaps the most vocal critic of the U.S.-led invasion that pushed Iraq out of Kuwait and pounded Iraqi targets for weeks.

In the Western war against Yugoslavia, the pope frequently voiced his reservations about the heavy damage to civilians and said further negotiation should have been pursued to settle the Kosovo question.

The pope has made clear that he has similar reservations about military action in countries suspected of harboring terrorists, but his spokesman has now given notice that a limited armed action against terrorism might meet with Vatican approval.

In the days that followed, Navarro-Valls tried to downplay his remarks by saying he had only been quoting "a few paragraphs from the Catholic catechism."

On Sept. 27, Navarro-Valls said the principles of self-defense did not signal a "green light" for a military attack in reprisal for the terrorist hijackings in the United States.

For one thing, he said, "what is involved here is not an attack, but an active prevention against a front that has already manifested itself in the horrible events of a few weeks ago and which could be repeated."

Navarro-Valls said the pope has made clear that any retaliation must not be seen as a confrontation with Islam.

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