

New Age success a 'wake-up call'

Cindy Wooden/CNS

VATICAN CITY — While buying crystals, soaking in a tub with aromatic oils or listening to pipe music does not mean one embraces the New Age movement, the Vatican said Christians who buy the products should ask themselves what they are seeking.

"Almost all the things in New Age have a good side," said Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

"Music that relaxes you is good, but if this music empties prayer and turns into just listening to music and falling asleep, you cannot call that prayer," he said at a Feb. 3 press conference marking the release of a Vatican "reflection" on the New Age movement.

Cardinal Paul Poupard, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, which produced the 93-page document with Archbishop Fitzgerald's office, said the growth of the New Age movement is a response to people's longing for "peace, harmony and reconciliation with themselves, with others and with nature."

Its success, he said, must be seen as a wake-up call to the church.

"It is obvious the church must ask why people go looking elsewhere for that which we believe is our reason for being: Jesus, the bearer of the water of life," the cardinal said.

The document contrasts the New Age movement's expectation of a coming "Age of Aquarius," the zodiacal water-bearer, with Christianity's faith in Jesus as the one who gives the water of salvation and eternal life.

While the New Age label has been placed on everything from music to philosophy, the Vatican document said, in its depths it:

- Opposes institutional religions.
- Replaces the Judeo-Christian profession of a personal God with an

interconnected cosmic web of energy.

- Denies the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, labeling him as just one example of a man who attained enlightenment.

- Denies the existence of sin and evil, focusing instead on bad energy or ignorance as the sources of personal and societal ills.

- Promotes self-realization and self-redemption, denying that salvation is a gift of God.

Father Peter Fleetwood, who worked on the document when he was an official at the council for culture, said that in the United States and Great Britain the label "New Age" is increasingly replaced by "holistic" sounding terms such as "mind/body/spirit," but the fundamental ideas remain intact.

"In a cultural environment marked by religious relativism, it is necessary to signal a warning against the attempt to place New Age religiosity on the same level as Christian faith, making the difference between faith and belief seem relative," the document said.

The Vatican offices said the permeation of New Age philosophy, spiritualism and religiousness in Western culture, including mandatory workplace training sessions and Catholic retreat houses, calls for greater attention to the beliefs the movement espouses.

Even when products are sold under a New Age label mainly as a marketing technique, they are sold with an un-Christian assumption that they can harness positive energy or change negative energy, it said.

In embracing elements of ancient pagan religions, some strains of the New Age movement also promote magic and the occult, the document said.

"We should not ignore the fact that magic and sorcery are being promoted in modern culture," said Teresa Osorio Goncalves, an official of



Reuters/CNS

Pope decries bombing

A young Colombian boy lays flowers at Bogota's central cemetery Feb. 9. Demonstrators protested against violence and a car-bombing that killed 32 people outside a social club Feb. 7. Pope John Paul II condemned the bombing, calling it an "appalling" act of unjustifiable violence.

the interreligious dialogue office, who worked on the document. "I think this is why U.S. Protestants reacted so strongly to 'Harry Potter,'" the books by J.K. Rowling and the films based on the books.

"The Catholic reaction has been more balanced, looking at the impact on children," she said.

"I don't think any of us grew up without the imaginary world of fairies, magicians and angels — they are not evil," said Father Fleetwood, who now works at the Council of European Episcopal Conferences.

Their uses in the Harry Potter books and films, he said, are "not a banner for an anti-Christian ideology ... but are used to teach the difference between good and evil."

"I see absolutely no problem with Harry Potter," he said.

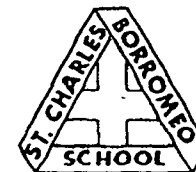
On the surface the New Age concern for the environment and its promotion of interreligious tolerance are positive, Cardinal Poupard said, and they are concerns shared by the Catholic Church.

But New Age sees the earth as Ga-

ia, a goddess, and promotes a universal religion in which all traces of the Judeo-Christian God will be erased.

"What worries me is that many people involved in certain types of oriental or indigenous spirituality are not truly able to be fully aware of what is hidden behind" the New Age's agenda, he said.

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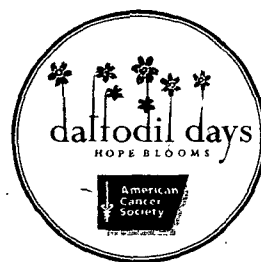
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Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580)

Vol. 114 No. 18, February 13, 2003

Published weekly except the first Thursday in January and the last Thursday in December. Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1136 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624, 585/529-9530. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, NY.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, PO Box 24379, Rochester, NY 14624.