

Pope plans trip to Slovakia

John Thavis/CNS

VATICAN CITY — When Pope John Paul II travels to Slovakia in September, he'll visit the front lines of an intensifying battle between the Catholic Church and the architects of Europe's social and political future.

In recent months, the pope has hammered the theme that Europe risks losing its "Christian soul" as it consolidates its economic unity. Bitterly disappointed that a draft European constitution lacks a specific reference to the continent's Christian heritage, he hopes predominantly Catholic countries will help change that text and the European Union direction on other issues.

At the same time, church leaders in Eastern European countries like Slovakia recognize that their own members are increasingly influenced by the material opportunities of the post-communist era and that faith may suffer as a result.

In Slovakia, a majority Catholic country set to join the European Union in 2004, all these tensions will be simmering as the pope arrives for a string of liturgies and meetings Sept. 11-14.

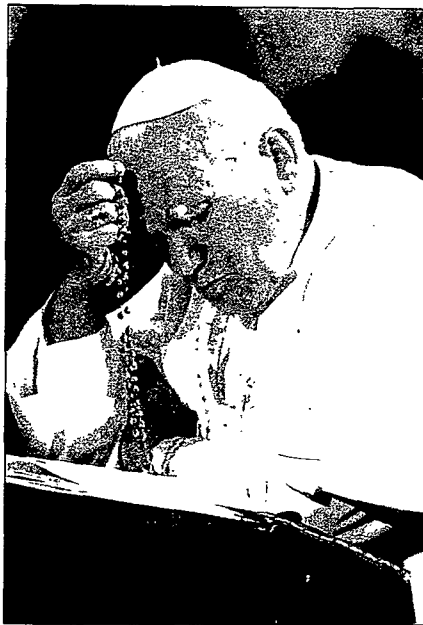
The debate in Slovakia, like the wider European discussion, also involves questions of language and history. For example, church sources said, some legislators want to remove references to Sts. Cyril and Methodius, who first evangelized the region, from the country's constitution.

But more recently the conflict has focused on a concrete and immediate issue: abortion. A bill that would strengthen provisions for legal abortion, allowing it up to the 24th week of pregnancy in cases of serious genetic defect, was passed by Parliament this summer.

When President Rudolf Schuster vetoed the bill in late July, the outcry among political factions risked bringing down his coalition government. The legislature will try to override the veto sometime this fall. Church-backed political parties, meanwhile, have mounted a constitutional challenge to the bill.

What is especially unnerving to church leaders is that according to recent opinion polls 60 percent or more of Slovaks support the abortion measure.

Cardinal Josef Tomko, Slovakia's leading churchman and the retired head of the Vatican's evangelization congregation, said one reason even Catholics may be confused is because of a "ferocious campaign" against moral values in the mass



CNS file photo

Pope John Paul II plans to visit Slovakia Sept. 11-14.

media.

"Our church in Slovakia is a popular church with traditional values. At the moment, it is being attacked on every front, especially on points of liberal 'dogma' — sexual freedom, abortion, euthanasia, homosexual unions and aid to private schools," Cardinal Tomko said in an interview in Rome.

"The mass media are bombarding people and maneuvering public opinion. The church in Slovakia has no TV of its own to counter this," he said.

Cardinal Tomko said groups outside Slovakia, in Germany, France and the United States, were funding the media and the anti-church campaign. He said the campaign had brought together liberals and former communists and that the aim in part was to "destroy the image of the Catholic Church in Slovakia."

All this helps explain why some Slovak Catholics are of two minds about the prospect of entering into the European Union next year. The fear is that in exchange for economic opportunities the country may be forced to fall into line with policies that go against church teachings.

Pope John Paul is expected to address the abortion issue as well as the wider questions of church-state relations during his appearances in four cities of western Slovakia.

His public comments will come primarily during liturgies and will be aimed primarily at Slovak Catholics, Vatican sources said. He wants to motivate Catholics to join the battle, especially when it touches on human-life issues.

"The church in Slovakia has a very beautiful cultural, sacramental and parish life. But now it has to find a way to penetrate into public life, through lay people," Cardinal Tomko said.

"In this way, the pope will oppose the message coming from the other side — that religion is strictly a private affair," he said.

Church leaders like Cardinal Tomko believe the church's current political struggles are caused in part by the generation that currently holds political power, a generation raised under the atheistic programs of Czechoslovakia's communist regime.

That makes younger generations all the more important to the church's future in Slovakia.

"I'm relatively optimistic about the religious future of the new generations," Cardinal Tomko said. He noted that there is good participation in parish life among the young, lay movements are thriving and there's been a boom in vocations.

One of the pope's main events will be the beatification of two people martyred under communism, and the challenge will be to reach out and make them significant figures to Slovakia's young people.

During a Mass in Bratislava, the capital, on the final day of his visit, the pope will proclaim as blessed Eastern Catholic Auxiliary Bishop Vasyl Hopko of Presov, 1904-76, and Holy Cross Sister Zdenka Schelingova, 1916-55. Both were imprisoned by communist authorities in a country known for its policies of religious persecution.

"Unfortunately, the new generation has no experience of this. Most young people in Slovakia today do not remember any direct experience of persecution, and those who do are trying to forget," Cardinal Tomko said.

"The pope realizes there is a risk of losing the memory of this, which makes the beatifications all the more important," he said.

Vatican officials will be carefully watching the 83-year-old pontiff during the four-day visit, which features few major events but considerable internal transportation. In recent weeks, the pope has appeared tired in the summer heat, and his aides are hoping Europe will cool off by the time he lands in Bratislava.

The pope will meet with state and government figures shortly after his arrival and then visits a cathedral in Trnava. The remaining days include Masses in three cities, private meetings with bishops and a departure ceremony.

Mass to honor Sept. 11 victims, local workers

ROCHESTER — The public is invited to a Mass Sept. 7 at St. Michael's Church, 869 N. Clinton Ave., to honor and pray for those lost in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Mass will also honor all local emergency-services personnel lost both on and off duty during the past year. Prayers will be offered for current emergency-services personnel to help them recommit to their work.

At 5 p.m., participants will gather at the corner of North Clinton and Avenue D for a 5:30 p.m. procession to the church. The procession will be led by a pipe and drum band as well as police, fire and emergency medical services personnel. Mass will begin at 6 p.m., and a reception will take place afterward in St. Michael's parish hall. More than 300 people attended a similar Mass last year.

For information, contact Capt. Dan McBride of the Rochester Fire Department at 585/428-3687.

Habitat plans to 'build on faith'

ROCHESTER — Habitat for Humanity will hold a "Building on Faith" week Sept. 14-20, during which volunteers from area churches will work to build several houses on Fulton Avenue.

The week kicks off Sept. 14 with a 3 p.m. ecumenical service at St. Michael's Church, 869 N. Clinton Ave. Liturgical dancers from Immaculate Conception Parish and the John Marshall High School Urban Steel Band are scheduled to perform, and Mayor Bill Johnson is scheduled to speak. A reception follows the service at 4 p.m.

During the remainder of the week, volunteers will work on one of five houses being built on Fulton Avenue.

Habitat's goal is to enlist the help of volunteers from 10 different area churches. Each church would need to provide a group of six volunteers willing to put in a full day's work on one of the building projects.

Churches interested in providing volunteers may call Diane Davis at 585/546-1470.