

Vatican takes on American Heresy at Rome meeting

by Maria Cristina Fiocchi and Susan Welsh

Pope John Paul II has made a powerful intervention into the moral crisis in the United States, convening a meeting at the Vatican March 8-11 with the leaders of the American Catholic Church. The essential problem facing the Church, he told the bishops, is that it operates “in a cultural context which questions the integrity and often the very existence of truth.”

This problem, while not unique to the Church in America, is particularly acute there. It has given rise to the “American Heresy,” “American Exceptionalism,” the notion that U.S. Catholics need not be bound by the traditional doctrines and central direction of the Vatican. According to this pernicious view, because America is a democratic and pluralistic society, it accepts no such thing as absolute truth; hence, the Church hierarchy is not obliged to follow the allegedly “authoritarian” dictates of Rome.

The Pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, and other speakers both from the Roman Curia and from within the American Church, made it clear that this view must no longer be tolerated. To the extent that it has been tolerated by American Catholic leaders, it has permitted such atrocities as the acceptance of homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, radical feminism, and political pacifism (the “nuclear freeze”). Many bishops, fearful of antagonizing their congregations by going against “the current of the times,” have allowed radical and outspoken theologians to shape Church theory and practice, in accordance with the worst features of the American ideology.

That is why both the Pope and Cardinal Ratzinger defined the agenda of the meeting as “The Role of the Bishop as a Teacher of the Faith.” As you will see in the documentation section following this article, they told the bishops that the time has come for the bishops themselves to run the Church, in accordance with the truth of the Gospel—not the vagaries of public opinion. “It is the hallmark of truth that it is worth suffering for,” said Cardinal Ratzinger. “In the deepest sense of the word, the Evangelist must also be a martyr. If he is unwilling to be so, he should not lay his hand to the plow.”



Carlos Wesley

A Catholic contingent at a "gay rights" parade in New York City. If the Church accepts the corrupt pragmatic ideology of "everybody do your own thing," then nothing will remain of God's truth, or of Natural Moral Law.

John Cardinal O'Connor of New York, in a very insightful speech excerpted below, pointed out that the rotten features of American cultural life today are indeed inimical to the actual American tradition of the Founding Fathers. The Founding Fathers were guided by a notion of Natural Moral Law, he said, which is fully coherent with the standpoint of Catholicism; but this notion has been undermined by the evil influences of pragmatism, utilitarianism, and social Darwinism. The challenge facing the Church today is precisely to reverse this cultural decay.

Points of dissent

The participants included, from the American Church, 36 archbishops and bishops, plus the secretary of the Bishops Conference; and 25 cardinals and archbishops of the Roman Curia. The meeting was chaired by the Pope and in his absence by Secretary of State Agostino Cardinal Casaroli; moderators were Cardinals Bernardin Gantin, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, and Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago.

The meeting had been convoked by John Paul II with a letter sent to the U.S. bishops on Jan. 10, calling upon them to bring into focus "the undisputed priorities of life in the Church today, both in its universal necessities and in the special requirements of the Church in the United States."

Such a meeting had been made necessary because of the notable points of dissent that had arisen between the U.S. bishops and the Vatican. In particular, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had recently blocked the text of a document of the American bishops on relations between bish-

ops and theologians, in which the figure of the theologian had erroneously prevailed over that of the bishop. For their part, the U.S. bishops had sent harsh criticisms against the "working draft" prepared by the Congregation for Bishops on the theological and juridical status of the Bishops Conferences. Other divergences had arisen around the issues of dealing with AIDS (in one document of the American Church, the use of condoms is uncritically accepted), priesthood for women, celibacy of priests, the economy, war, and so forth.

Bernardin Cardinal Gantin, who together with Chicago's Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, presented the meeting to the international press, said that it should be regarded not as a conflict but rather as a dialogue. Citing a phrase of Pope John he said, "Let's not complicate simple things and let's not simplify complicated things." But he did not hide the existence of grave and difficult problems. "The bishop as a teacher of faith, will be the central point of the discussion," the African cardinal stressed.

The intervention of Cardinal Bernardin left observers puzzled. He went on at great length to describe the characteristics of American society and the American Catholic Church, painting the image of a kind of Eldorado on the one hand and on the other, of a Church richer than ever and without any vocational crisis: "We are blessed," he said, "with many dedicated, hard-working priests, deacons, and men and women religious. Together with our laity, they are the incarnation of the Church in our time and place."

This was in practice a defense of the "American way" of Catholicism. The same tone was taken by Archbishop John May, chairman of the American Bishops Conference, who

introduced the first day's session. "The United States," he said, "is pluralistic; it enjoys full religious liberty; organized religion abounds in America; there is full freedom of thought; and the spirit of democracy runs strong." Forgetting that anti-abortionists are locked up in American jails, Monsignor May went on: "One of our original ideals is freedom of religion . . . our courts exist to safeguard religion, not to inhibit it." The archbishop of St. Louis went so far as to define the monopolizing and dictatorial power of the American mass media as an expression of "total *freedom of thought*," which accepts no form of censorship. Not a mention of the 40 million poor living in the United States, the drug plague, or the growing violence of American society.

Particularly telling was his definition of the "*spirit of democracy*" in the country: "Authoritarianism is suspect in any area of learning or culture. Individual freedom is prized supremely. Religious doctrine and moral teaching are judged by these criteria. Hence, to assert that there is one Church teaching with authority binding and loosing for eternity, is truly a sign of contradiction for many Americans who consider the divine right of bishops as outmoded as the divine right of kings."

This argument was confronted head-on by John Cardinal O'Connor, the archbishop of New York, who pointed out that a mistaken application of "political pluralism" to the teaching and the authority of the Church, has led to a mentality of opting for that which is doctrinally unacceptable.

James Cardinal Hickey, archbishop of Washington, pointed to the importance of the instability of the family institution. "One out of every two marriages ends in divorce," the prelate observed. "As a result, many young people lack a clear value system or a strong sense of personal morality. This often hinders them from making permanent life commitments." He added that there is "an over-reliance on the social sciences. These sciences, particularly psychology, often shape the values and norms of our society. For many Americans, volunteerism and a multitude of self-help programs take the place religion used to occupy."

Archbishop Patrick Flores summed up the prevalent realities in U.S. society as follows:

"1) Narcissism, individualism, emphasis on the individual. Concentration on 'doing one's own thing,' 'don't need anyone else,' 'I have no impact on anyone else,' 'nothing wrong with me';

"2) consumerism;

"3) mobility, lack of roots;

"4) disintegration of marriages and family life, high divorce rate, single-parent families, often poor;

"5) scarce weight given to the dignity of human life."

Boston Archbishop Bernard Cardinal Law spoke of "an exaggerated emphasis on the right to privacy and an equally exaggerated diminution of attention to the common good. Hence, fundamental relationships such as marriage and the family are set aside because of the personal sacrifices they

require and their intrinsic definitiveness. There is also an intellectual climate that destroys the absolute and a moral climate that exalts the rejections of others' moral choices as a virtue."

A harsh bill of indictment was delivered by Eduard Cardinal Gagnon, chairman of the Pontifical Council on the Family, who dwelt on the subject of feminism, a much-discussed problem at the meeting. Cardinal Gagnon underlined the sacredness of human life, quoting the Charter of the Rights of the Family that "economic aid for the advancement of peoples must not be conditioned on acceptance of programs of contraception, sterilization, or abortion." He described the destructive effect of pornography and said, "I would suggest that we do something too about another and more subtle pornography, that is the degrading of moral values vehicled by cinema and TV shows which pretend to depict normal American life," such as the soap opera "Dallas."

Solutions proposed

What is the Church's response to these myriad challenges? Some strategic directions were outlined. In his report, Antonio Cardinal Innocenti said: "There is a need for a strong supernatural motivation, together with a greater emotional closeness of the bishops to their own priests." He sketched a profile of the ideal priest for modern North American society: "a man chosen from among men with an acute discernment of vocation, with the primary task of proclaiming the Word of God, of promoting the Catechism in the first person, of acting in *persona Christi*, above all in the celebration of the Eucharist, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, of being a many of prayer and example of a style of life that gives priority to reflection, inwardness, and asceticism in a world of sin, superficiality, consumerism, and the ephemeral."

Bernard Cardinal Law added, "The priest, to fulfill his task in society, must keep in mind the following: He must be free enough from administrative tasks; he must consider the Church as the first teacher in his own life; even in a moral climate of relativism, he must know how to understand the reality of sin and to call himself and others to conversion and penitence."

John Paul II, in closing the sessions, reiterated: "We are the guardians of something given, and given to the Church universal; something which is not the result of reflection, however competent, on cultural and social questions of the day, and is not merely the best path among many, but the one and only path to salvation. . . . The true measure of our success will consist in *greater holiness, more loving service of those in need, and the advancement of truth and justice* in every sphere of the life of your people and your country. As one of our brothers so rightly said: 'Success cannot be the criterion or the condition of evangelization. The criterion and condition of evangelization must be fidelity to the mission.' "