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Catholics Begin Talk
On Unity, Liberty

By W. Barry Garrett

ROME (BP)-- Religious liberty cropped up for discussion the very first day of talk about Christian unity at the gathering of the world's Roman Catholic bishops here.

Cardinal Joseph Ritter, Archbishop of St. Louis, speaking for several bishops of the United States expressed pleasure that the schema on Christian unity dealt with religious liberty. "Without a declaration of this kind by the council," he said, "there can be no mutual discussion and the door will be closed to any real dialogue with those outside the church."

"Expediency," the cardinal continued, "should not be the motive of religious liberty. It should proceed from solid theological principles." He then named three basic ideas: (1) the absolute freedom of the act of faith, (2) the inviolability of human conscience, and (3) the incompetence of any civil government to interpret the gospel of Christ, with consequent independence of the church from civil authority in the accomplishment of its mission.

Other bishops, however, were not happy that religious liberty is included in the schema on unity. Cardinal Ignace Gabriel Tappouni, Syrian Patriarch of Antioch, objected both to the discussion of Christian attitudes toward Jews and of religious liberty in the unity proposal.

Cardinal Benjamin de Arriba y Castro, Archbishop of Tarragona, Spain, said that if the dialogue between Catholics and non-Catholics extended to the "not well-educated" members of the church it could prove dangerous to the faith. They are not in a position to answer the difficulties proposed to them, he said.

The Spanish bishop complained about the increase of "proselytism." He said, "For this reason the schema should include an exhortation to our separated brethren to refrain from proselytism in Catholic countries lest they sow confusion in the minds of the faithful."

The United States bishops, both last year and this year, have insisted that the council make a clear statement on religious liberty and church-state relations.

Traditionalists in the church are reported to be holding back on religious liberty while the liberals are pushing forward. For a while it appeared that the subject would not be discussed at this session of the council. But strong rumors have it that Pope Paul VI himself sent word to commission leaders that he wanted religious liberty to be brought before the council this year.

In the schema on Christian unity religious liberty is the subject of chapter five. Since this session is rapidly drawing to a close (Dec. 4) it still remains uncertain whether this chapter will be fully discussed this year.