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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
(615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Robert J. O'Brien, News Editor
Norman Jameson, Feature Editor

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30309, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Richard T. McCartney, Chief, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Tex. 75201, Telephone (214) 741-1996
MEMPHIS Roy Jennings, Chief, 1548 Poplar Ave., Memphis, Tenn. 38104, Telephone (901) 272-2461
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) L. Bracey Campbell III, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2798
RICHMOND Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151
WASHINGTON Stan L. Haste, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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Analysis

Southern Baptists, Pope
Interact During U.S. Visit

By George Sheridan
for Baptist Press

The recent visit of the pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church to the United States was marked by contact and comparison and some confrontation with Southern Baptists.

During his week-long visit in this country Oct. 1-7, Pope John Paul II met a number of Southern Baptists and even was compared favorably with an evangelical preacher.

When Baptists disagreed with papal words and actions, the disagreement was generally respectful and grounded in principles rather than any sweeping anti-Catholicism.

The pope expressed specific gratitude for exchanges between Southern Baptist and Catholic theologians in this country and cited as the aim of such dialogue: "the full evangelistic and Christian dimension of truth."

The first greeting to the pontiff as he stepped onto U.S. soil came from Southern Baptist First Lady Rosalynn Carter. Mrs. Carter hailed the pope's commitment to values of the family, human rights and love. She said she would pray his visit would "help bring our people a renewed spirit of harmony and peace."

Near the close of the papal journey, Southern Baptist President Jimmy Carter became the first American president to welcome a reigning pope to the nation's capital. Carter praised God for a feeling of "solemn joy" that the moment brought. He welcomed John Paul to the White House as the "symbolic home of all our people."

In his remarks to the president, the pope affirmed "the mutual independence and self-government of the political community and the church" while pointing out that both serve the needs of the same human beings.

In many of his addresses throughout the week, John Paul was teaching about the Bible, exhorting people to moral and disciplined personal lives or calling them to holiness through giving Christ primacy in their lives.

Speaking in Philadelphia, the pontiff said, "What really matters in life is that we are loved by Christ and that we love him in return. In comparison to the love of Jesus, everything else is secondary. And without the love of Jesus, everything else is useless."

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He told a meeting of priests from throughout the nation that "the church's fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of God, to help men to be familiar with the profundity of the redemption taking place in Jesus."

At Madison Square Garden, where 20,000 Catholic youths cheered the pope for nine minutes before he could begin his address, he told the young people: "This is the meaning of life: to know Christ...The world needs you because it needs Christ and you belong to Christ." He called them to "proclaim by the conduct of your daily lives that you really do believe that Jesus Christ is Lord."

For the Knights of Columbus, an organization of Catholic laymen, the pope prayed that the Lord may "through your efforts bring forth abundant fruits of evangelization."

The pope encouraged the bishops of the Catholic Church gathered in Chicago "to stand fast in the holiness and truth of our Lord Jesus Christ." He added, "It is our union with Jesus Christ that determines the credibility of our witness to the Gospel." He urged them to maintain "fidelity to the love and friendship of Jesus."

In his homily on Boston Common, the pope greeted the nation saying that he came "in the name of Christ" to tell them that "God loves you." He closed, "This is why I have come to America: to call you to Christ--to call all of you to live in his love, today and forever."

In Washington, he encouraged the development of contemplative communities that devote their lives to prayer.

In a brief stop on a street in Harlem, the bishop of Rome sounded most like a Baptist preacher, saying, "I come to you as a servant of Jesus Christ, and I want to speak to you about him." The pope said a true sense of joy is the keynote of the Christian message. He called Christians to rejoice and to bring their joy to those who don't have it, "for we are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song."

In a speech to the Organization of American States, John Paul urged the nations of the Americas to see that all citizens are given their freedoms so that the "Christian communions (would) be able to devote themselves to the central task of evangelization, namely the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the source of life, strength, justice and peace."

In addition to his emphases on traditional Baptist concerns for the Bible, evangelism and prayer, the pope also hammered hard at the issue of restoring moral order to the society.

In Philadelphia, while praising the city's commitment to the principle of freedom, Pope John Paul warned, "Freedom can never be seen as a pretext for moral anarchy." He deplored a concept of freedom which would justify "any behavior that is no longer consistent with the true moral order."

He especially called Americans to share their wealth with the poor in this nation and worldwide, and called us away from "the life style of many of the members of our rich and permissive societies" and to make a decisive "break with the frenzy of consumerism, exhausting and joyless."

In various speeches, the pontiff spoke out against sex outside of marriage, homosexual activity, maltreatment and unconcern for the poor, abortion, euthanasia and divorce.

A primary moral theme of the papal visit was Pope John Paul's opposition to the escalating arms race. At the United Nations, he criticized the nations for a lack of efforts for real disarmament and for their "continual preparation for war." He spoke strongly in favor of disarmament in speeches to the Organization of American States and at the White House.

Other moral themes touched on by the pontiff in his addresses to statesmen included a strong call for basic human rights for all human beings, care for the environment, just distribution of the world's goods and freedom of religious expression.

At least 15 Southern Baptists were among several hundred leaders from various Christian traditions who were invited to an ecumenical prayer service with the pope at the chapel of Trinity College in Washington, D.C.

In an address to the primarily non-Catholic audience, John Paul II called it a privilege to give expression together with other Christians that "Jesus Christ is the son of God" and to proclaim that there is "one mediator between God and men--the man Jesus Christ."

He emphasized that the assemblage was united in esteem and love for sacred Scripture, "which we recognize is the inspired word of God." He praised particularly joint Christian witness through social action such as in issues of social justice, peace, public morality and the sacredness of marriage.

Porter W. Routh, recently retired executive secretary-treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, who shared the platform with the pope and leaders of seven other Christian fellowships during the prayer service, praised the pontiff for his warmth and for "magnifying common objectives rather than organizational differences."

Routh said that the words of Pope John Paul would "articulate the intentions of Bold Mission Thrust," the Southern Baptist program to evangelize the world. "I appreciate his emphasis upon marriage and the family and other implications of the gospel," Routh added. He said that he had received no negative criticism for participating in the ecumenical service.

Other Baptist leaders who participated in the service included: James Wood of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs; Carrington Paulette and James Langley of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention; William Cumble of Mount Vernon Association in Virginia; William Hendricks of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary; Doran McCarty of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Frank Stagg and Glenn Hinson of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Bob Adams of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; John Steely of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; William Angell of Wake Forest University; Robert Maddox, special assistant to President Carter; and Glenn Igleheart and George Sheridan of the Home Mission Board's interfaith witness department.

Some negative responses were expressed by Baptists to aspects of the pope's visit. Frank Stagg, senior professor of New Testament at Southern Seminary, criticized the pontiff's opposition to women in the ministry and his clamps upon academic freedom.

In Des Moines, a Baptist church building near the pope's route displayed a sign warning the faithful to "call no man father."

Also in Iowa, Gustave Rhodes, a black Louisiana sugar plantation worker who had been invited to receive communion from the pope as a representative of sugar workers expressed regret when he was excluded at the last minute when it was discovered he is a Baptist. The pope warned twice in his visit that celebration of the Eucharist with non-Catholic Christians would not be possible until greater unity is attained.

Although most of his words uttered in public addresses in this country were scriptural or pastoral, Pope John Paul II also said some things that evoked traditional problems in Baptist-Catholic relations.

Primary among these were his prayers to Mary and other saints and his admonition that all Catholics express similar devotion, his exclusion of the community of the faithful from the calling out of the ministry and his references to the "supernatural" effects of the Catholic mass.

The point of concern raised most by Baptists regarding the papal visit was over the matter of separation of church and state. In Philadelphia, Mary Anne Forehand, a former Southern Baptist foreign missionary and Woman's Missionary Union employee who is ordained and now works as an editor for the American Baptist Churches, brought a suit against the city because of church-state implications, to bar it from financing construction of a costly platform upon which the pope was to say mass Oct. 3.

Ms. Forehand was joined in her suit by the Board of National Ministries of the American Baptist Churches and by the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. The action was also supported by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. (BP)

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This report and analysis of the pope's visit was prepared by George Sheridan, regional director for the Northeast for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's department of interfaith witness. Sheridan, a former associate editor of Georgia's Christian Index, traveled to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington to hear John Paul II, and read most of the pope's speeches.

Trentham Vote
Moved Up

Baptist Press
10/22/79

WASHINGTON (BP)--Washington's First Baptist Church will decide Oct. 28 whether to renew the contract of senior minister Charles A. Trentham.

Originally scheduled for Nov. 28, the vote was moved up a full month when 25 church members requested the change. According to the church's by-laws, the church moderator is obligated to schedule a business meeting when such a request is made.

By a vote of 27-11 on Oct. 3, the church deacons voted not to renew Trentham's three-year contract, which expires next February. He is presently serving his second three-year term as pastor under the unusual contractual arrangement.

The deacons' action was taken after a divided pastoral staff committee recommended that the 60-year-old pastor of President Carter be terminated because of his two divorces and what the committee called his "poor judgment by becoming involved with a young woman of the congregation who is also divorced."

Trentham has denied reports in some news stories that he abused an alleged counseling relationship with the woman.

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Hollis Feels Church
Best Family Help

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--After listening to two days of testimony in a regional hearing of the White House Conference on Families, Harry N. Hollis Jr. is more convinced than ever that "the church is the best friend families have" and is doing more than any other institution to ease "the intense and often invisible suffering" felt by families today.

On the other hand, the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission staff member said he heard "far too much rhetoric about family" in the hearing, "and, unfortunately, some of it came from representatives of the religious community."

"If the church is going to make a difference in strengthening family life, then we must move past rhetoric to service, past cliches to genuine compassion," he said.

Hollis, who has directed the Christian Life Commission's family life emphases for the past 10 years, was a panelist at back-to-back hearings in Nashville and Memphis. He is the only Southern Baptist representative on the 40-member National Advisory Committee appointed by President Jimmy Carter to give direction to the 1980 White House conference. In an effort to "take the conference to the people," the committee is sponsoring hearings in seven different regions of the country.

The mid-South hearing included testimony from nearly 300 persons representing a wide spectrum of families and social service, private and religious organizations.

Hollis said the testimonies emphasized the "great diversity in the structure of families in society" and underscored the need for the church to "minister to all families, not just the traditional family."

A dominant theme in the hearing, he said, was family suffering created by such factors as discrimination, child and spouse abuse, chronic illness, perpetual poverty, and lack of communication. He said he was particularly distressed by the "devastating impact" inflation has on families.

Hollis stressed that the church be an advocate for families through social action as well as ministry. "If the church doesn't stand up for some of these people, then who will?" he said.

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CORRECTION: In (BP) story mailed Oct. 19 entitled "Injured Children Improving Steadily," please change Oklahoma governor's name in graph six to George Nigh, not George High.

Thanks, Baptist Press