

NATION

Catholic leader revels in pro-life crusade

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

New York's Cardinal John O'Connor took pride yesterday in the religious slurs used against the pro-life movement, and said it faces a society full of rival gods who decide who shall live or die.

"Call me a right-wing fundamentalist. Call me a religious nut," said the leader of the nation's most prominent Catholic archdiocese. "This changes nothing. To claim the right to kill the innocent is to claim the right to be God."

The cardinal, who opened a national conference on "the culture of life" at Catholic University's Columbus School of Law, said that America's cavalier attitude toward

CORRECTION

A tax plan offered by Reps. Jennifer Dunn, Washington Republican, and Jerry Weller, Illinois Republican, would increase the 15-percent tax bracket only for married couples. The details were incorrectly reported in a story yesterday.

Labels shouldn't deter fight, he says

abortion, euthanasia and sex arises from secular law making everyone their own god.

"In our society, law has become the great teacher," he told a gathering of several hundred in the spacious new law school facility. "What we do as gods is change our laws to fit our determination of good and evil."

The conference continues through tomorrow, featuring talks by five American cardinals, a Vatican representative and a range of experts on reproductive issues, the media, population, sexuality and the family.

After what Catholic leaders have called a shocking failure of the U.S. government to outlaw even partial-birth abortion, the hierarchy has issued a teaching document aimed at galvanizing Catholics in public life.

Moreover, the conference is considered a major briefing to inaugurate the next era of church efforts to address what Pope John Paul II calls "a culture of death."

Part of Cardinal O'Connor's speech encouraged church work-

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ers to continue despite legal setbacks and a lukewarm public response. He said they should promote nonviolence, adoptions and street marches while denouncing attacks on doctors. They should also keep up legislative work, care for pregnant women and public relations, he said.

But Cardinal O'Connor said a deeper force driving the cultural demise must be met with prayer and fasting. "This is a demon," he said, welcoming again "the charge of being a religious fanatic." He said, "This has to be diabolic, what's happening in our country, this culture of death."

Since the 1980s, the church has promoted what Cardinal Joseph Bernardin called in a Georgetown speech the "consistent ethic of life." It seemed to argue that all life issues — from abortion to poverty and the death penalty — had moral equality.

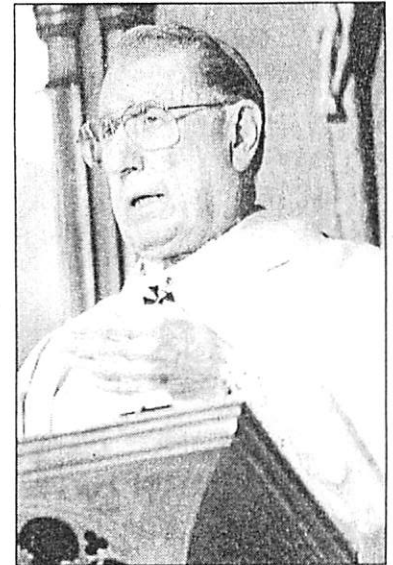
The new Catholic document, "Living the Gospel of Life," evokes a different image from Cardinal Bernardin's "seamless garment" of social justice mandates.

Now, the image is God's house, with abortion and euthanasia as the "foundation" and unemployment, racism, housing and health care "crossbeams and walls."

Church officials at the conference said Cardinal Bernardin's writings had given priority to opposing abortion and euthanasia because they target those in the most defenseless stages of life.

Under the "seamless garment" ethic, Catholic lawmakers who voted in defense of legal abortion had said, "We are good on eight out of 10, so leave us alone," explained church spokeswoman Helen Alvarez. She said the "new paradigm" clarifies for them the church's moral priority.

In the pope's message to the con-



John O'Connor

ference, he said a "strange paradox" has beset the end of the century. "The sanctity of life is being denied by an appeal to freedom, democracy, pluralism, even reason and compassion."

Law school dean Bernard Dobranski said that the Supreme Court has encouraged a society of many gods, citing a 1992 ruling by Justice Anthony Kennedy, a Catholic: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence."