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# Bishops' letter on gay children gets laity's focus at conference

By Larry Witham  
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The nation's Roman Catholic bishops opened their annual meeting here yesterday with a call for unity in the church, but their recent letter on acceptance of homosexuals in Catholic families kept the faithful in sharp debate.

"The church is being called to a spirit of repentance and reconciliation," said Archbishop Anthony M. Pilla, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a keynote address. "As church members resist the call to be reconciled to one another, they become an excuse why others need not be reconciled."

The nation's 60 million Catholics, plus nearly 1 billion worldwide, have been urged by Pope John Paul II to use the three years before 2000 to concede failures of the church and be an example of unity to a world in conflict.

Though the bishops' letter on homosexual children, "Always Our Children," was not cited by Archbishop Pilla of Cleveland, it was the focus of lay activists yesterday.

Crisis, a national magazine, circulated an open letter to bishops and to Rome saying the letter is "so seriously flawed it threatens to mislead the faithful" on church

teaching about homosexuality.

That petition, signed by 35 prominent American Catholics, did not call for a particular action. But members of Dignity, a Catholic homosexual caucus, counterdemonstrated to urge wide implementation of the bishops' letter.

The bishops' panel on marriage and family wrote the letter, which emphasizes acceptance of Catholics with a homosexual orientation, but rejects the practice.

"The importance of this letter cannot be underestimated," Charles Cox of Dignity said outside the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill, where the bishops meet through Thursday. He said dioceses should develop programs for open homosexuals.

"We're with the bishops all the way," said Veronica Colfer of Silver Spring, whose son is a homosexual and lives in San Francisco.

Conservative groups such as Crisis, however, said the letter contradicts church teaching against same-sex attraction and fails to warn parents that homosexuality may arise from abuse or youthful experimentation.

"Always Our Children," issued on Oct. 1, has received 10-to-1 positive mail, according to the bishops' offices. In contrast, when the Arlington Catholic Herald

published the document, it received mostly complaints.

"The intent of the document was a very good and positive intent," said Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston at a general news conference. "Now, having read some of the criticisms, I would want to go over the statement carefully again," he said.

In business yesterday, the bishops voted to continue financial aid to churches in Eastern Europe. They also agreed to a study of making Friday a voluntary day of penance, either by abstention from meat or some other sacrifice. The day, some bishops said, would be a protest against "the culture of death," including abortion and euthanasia.

Two bishops urged statements against possible U.S. military action against Iraq, but debate was reserved for Wednesday.

The bishops also wrote to members of Congress to consider the moral effect, such as loss of American jobs or abuse of cheap labor abroad, in considering President Clinton's "fast-track" trade legislation.

"We try not to take a stand on specific legislation," said Newark, N.J., Archbishop Theodore McCarrick. "If we speak to it, we speak to the values."