

Phan spells out goals of interfaith dialogue

Robert Mickens
In Rome

FR PETER PHAN, a noted US theologian whose writings have long been under Vatican scrutiny, told a conference in Rome last weekend that the topic of religious pluralism was “one of the most pressing issues” in the Catholic Church today – and one of the most dangerous.

“It is a controversial theme and one that in the current ecclesiastical climate is broached at one’s peril,” the Georgetown University professor said. He was the keynote speaker at a 28-31 August meeting of more than 40 Dominican priests, sisters and laity involved in interreligious dialogue around the world.

“To judge from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s [CDF] declaration *Dominus Iesus* [2000] and the investigations of the works of theologians Jacques Dupuis, Roger Haight, Jon Sobrino and a host of lesser lights, there is no doubt that what is called the theology of religious pluralism constitutes the neuralgic point of contemporary Catholic theology,” he told the assembly.

Dominus Iesus – subtitled, “On the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” – sought to reaffirm the Church’s teaching on the nature of the Church and salvation and to refute errors.

The Vietnamese-born Fr Phan, who emi-

grated to the United States in 1975 and is a priest of the Diocese of Dallas, has questioned some of the theological assertions in that declaration, leading the Vatican to investigate his teaching.

In 2005 the CDF began reviewing a book he published a year earlier entitled *Being Religious Interreligiously*. However, it was the US bishops’ conference’s Committee on Doctrine that eventually issued a 15-page critique of the work in December 2007. It said the book contained “pervading ambiguities and equivocations that could easily confuse or mislead” Catholics and claimed that it did “not express adequately and accurately the Church’s teaching” (*The Tablet*, 15 December 2007). Immediately following that warning, the CDF issued a “Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelisation”, which a Vatican official told *The Tablet* was “definitely related” to the US investigation into Fr Phan’s book (*The Tablet*, 22 December 2007).

The Dominicans invited the theologian to speak at their annual gathering on interfaith dialogue called Journées Romaines Dominicaines (JRD). The topic of the meeting was “Universal Salvation: Challenged by religious identity”. Fr Phan elaborated on the ideas that are found in his writings and raised more questions than he answered.

“Is interfaith dialogue intended (and organised, sometime surreptitiously) as a means



Fr Peter Phan.
Photo: CNS

for conversion?” he asked. “The answer, to my mind, must be

no. Its only goal is to learn about other religions as well as to inform others about one’s religion as much and as accurately as possible, and to be enriched, intellectually and spiritually, by such an exchange of life, action, theology and prayer,” he said. “Peter Phan was invited to speak so we could discuss his ideas, not to adopt them or follow them, but to discuss them,” said Fr Márcio Couto, director of Intellectual Life for the Dominican Order and one of the organisers of the JRD.

“We thought he would broaden the horizons for us,” said Fr Prakash Lohale, the order’s Pakistani director of Apostolic Life. “We wanted the opportunity to debate with him to understand him better, and to give him a forum here with people already involved in dialogue.” Sr Anna Morrone OP said: “We were impressed by the way he treated everyone with great respect and friendship.”

In January 2008 the Dominicans at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St Louis cancelled an annual lecture that was to feature Fr Phan after the local archbishop, Raymond Burke, objected to it. Archbishop Burke, now head of Apostolic Signatura and residing in Rome, said Fr Phan was “not a reliable teacher of the Catholic faith”.

Bertone denies any ‘reform of the reform’

THE VATICAN Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone SDB, has defended Pope Benedict XVI against insinuations that he is trying to roll back reforms ushered in with the Second Vatican Council, writes Robert Mickens.

In an interview in the 28 August issue of the Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, the cardinal said “ruminations and whispers about presumed documents of reversal are pure invention.” On the contrary, there were a number of aspects of Vatican II that the Pope had “constantly promoted with intelligence and profundity of thought”. He claimed they had led to “developments never before realised”, especially in better relations with the Orthodox, Jews and Muslims.

Wartime foes celebrate Mass for peace

LEADING FIGURES from Germany and Poland came together to attend a Mass in Berlin last Sunday in commemoration of the outbreak of the Second World War 70 years ago, writes Christa Pongratz-Lippitt.

The German President, Horst Köhler, and the Polish ambassador to Germany, Marek Prawda, were among those present at a Mass concelebrated at a packed St Hedwig’s Cathedral by Polish and German bishops.

In his homily, Bishop Viktor Skworc of Tarnow in southern Poland, who is in charge of Polish-German relations for the Polish bishops’ conference, cautioned against concentrating too much on the past. “We should not keep on enumerating the victims in our attempts to assess the amount of suffering,” he said. The chief concern now was to concentrate on worldwide work for peace.

The German bishops’ representative to the

Polish Church, Archbishop Ludwig Schick of Bamberg, has warned in recent interviews against rising nationalism in Germany and Poland. And Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz of Warsaw said it was imperative for neighbouring countries in Europe to continue to seek new ways of working and living together.

A week earlier, on 25 August, the German and Polish bishops’ conferences published a seven-page joint declaration. The text condemned the German war of aggression and the expulsion of Poles by Germany under the Nazis and of Germans from Silesia after the war. The president of the German bishops’ conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, told the Catholic news agency KNA that German-Polish relations were still more delicate than German-French relations because the wounds on both sides had not yet been fully healed.

(See Denis MacShane, page 13.)

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ITALY

Blair says globalised world needs faith

Robert Mickens
In Rome

FORMER BRITISH Prime Minister Tony Blair has called for a greater role for religious faith – especially the Catholic Church – in public affairs, warning that without it the world risks becoming a slave to globalisation.

“The Church can be the insistent spiritual voice that makes globalisation our servant and not our master,” Mr Blair said on 27 August at the annual Meeting of Friendship Among Peoples in the north-eastern Italian resort town of Rimini.

Mr Blair told the meeting, sponsored by the conservative ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation, that society could not be “truly harmonious” and complete without giving a place to faith.

“The danger is clear: that the pursuit of pleasure becomes an end in itself,” he said. “It is here that faith can step in, can show us

a proper sense of duty to others, responsibility for the world around us, can lead us to, as the Holy Father calls it, *Caritas in Veritate* [Love in Truth],” said Mr Blair, who became a Catholic after leaving office in 2007 and set up a faith foundation that bears his name.

He called Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical on human development “a strong rejoinder to the notion of relativism”.

Interviewed by an Italian Franciscan website this week, Mr Blair said that he was hopeful for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In the right circumstances, Netanyahu will deliver a deal,” Mr Blair told *Terrasanta.net*.

■ Gaza's ruling Islamist movement Hamas said this week that Palestinian children should not be taught about the Holocaust in UN-run schools. The head of its education committee in Gaza, Abdul Rahman el-Jamal, told the BBC the Holocaust was a “big lie”.

POLAND

Leading writer voices doubts about encyclical

THE LEADING American Catholic writer, George Weigel, has told Polish Catholics the Pope's new encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, fails to present Benedict XVI's real views and urged them to remain faithful to the pro-capitalist teachings of their countryman, the late John Paul II, writes *Jonathan Luxmoore*.

“There are fragments of *Caritas in Veritate*, easily recognisable to people who know the mentality and thinking of Joseph Ratzinger, which develop the line of John Paul II,” Mr Weigel said in an article in the *Polska* daily.

“The trouble is with those fragments which

seem to reflect the convictions of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and which show distinct left-wing leanings like similar bodies in other Christian and ecumenical communities.” The article, “Capitalism is the only Catholic system”, excerpts of which were republished last month by Poland's church-run Catholic Information Agency, called the encyclical a “complicated and in places unclear document” shaped by “incoherent sentimentalism” which embodied “a kind of hybrid” between the Pope's true beliefs and “plots and demands by intellectuals and activists”.

■ **SLOVAKIA:** THE PRESIDENT of Slovakia's Catholic bishops' conference has condemned plans by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to set up its regional headquarters in his country, writes *Jonathan Luxmoore*.

Archbishop Frantisek Tondra wrote in a letter to his Polish counterpart, Józef Michalik, the Archbishop of Przemyśl: “From the point of view of the values of human life, the family and responsible parenthood, the UNFPA should be seen as

an anti-Christian and anti-Catholic institution. In other words, it poses a deadly danger, as an incubator of evil and the culture of death, which propagates abortion, sterilisation and contraception.”

He said that he was appealing for support against the move from Catholic clergy abroad. He added: “This organisation acts against the family and against the responsible formation of young people – this is the main reason for our grave concern.”

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INDIA

Gujarat wins award after Jesuits' protest

A LONDON-BASED magazine owned by The Financial Times Group has decided to give a prestigious award that it conferred on an ultranationalist politician to the state of Gujarat instead, writes *Anto Akkara*.

Late last month *fDi* (Foreign Direct Investment) magazine announced that it was conferring its "fDi Asian Personality of the Year 2009" award to Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat state which, according to a statement put out by the magazine, last year attracted US\$2.8 billion (£1.7 bn) in foreign direct investment.

In a joint appeal to the owners of the FT Group, a coalition of human and civil rights groups that includes the Jesuit social action group, Prashant, called for the magazine to reverse its decision. Mr Modi and 62 of his colleagues are under investigation by a special investigation team appointed by the Indian Supreme Court, for their alleged role in riots in 2002 in which 1,000 people were killed.

fDi told *The Tablet* on Wednesday: "Following a review prompted by the ongoing investigation into the 2002 Gujarat riots, *fDi* has decided to present its award to Gujarat state, rather than Mr Narendra Modi ... The criteria of the award has always remained focused on rewarding the success of a region in attracting foreign investment."

UNITED STATES

Bishops warn on health-care reforms

TWO KANSAS CITY bishops have issued a pastoral letter warning of the dangers of "excessive centralisation" and "government socialisation" of medicine that they foresee in the health-care reforms proposed by President Barack Obama, writes *Abigail Frymann*.

They caution against the inclusion of end-of-life counselling in the reforms and the use of taxpayers' money to fund abortions. The 22 August pastoral statement "Principles of Catholic social teaching and health-care reform" was issued by Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City and Bishop Robert W. Finn of Kansas City-St Joseph and posted online on 1 September. It follows a letter from the US bishops' conference's chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, Cardinal Justin Rigali, to the House of Representatives on 11 August urging lawmakers to preserve the "longstanding federal policies that prevent government promotion of abortion".

The Kansas bishops write: "Our country, in some ways, is the envy of people from countries with socialised systems of medical care."

(See *Michael McGough and Michael Sean Winters, pages 4-5.*)

UNITED STATES

Kennedy's last plea to Pope read at graveside

Timothy Lavin
In Washington

SENATOR Edward M. Kennedy, the nation's most prominent Catholic politician and the last of a generation of Kennedys to leave an abiding imprint on American public life, was laid to rest last week at Arlington National Cemetery after a battle with brain cancer.

At the burial, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington DC read from a letter that Mr Kennedy wrote to Pope Benedict XVI in his last days, which President Barack Obama hand-delivered during his visit to the Vatican in July.

"I am writing with deep humility to ask that you pray for me as my own health declines," Mr Kennedy wrote. "I have always tried to be a faithful Catholic, Your Holiness, and though I have fallen short through human failings, I have never failed to believe and respect the fundamental teachings. I continue to pray for God's blessings on you and our Church and would be most thankful for your prayers for me."

Cardinal McCarrick also read from a response sent two weeks later by a Vatican representative. "His Holiness prays that in the days ahead you may be sustained in faith and hope, and granted the precious grace of joyful surrender to the will of God our merciful Father," it said in part.

During his 47 years in the US Senate,

Edward Kennedy maintained it was the government's most important role to protect the underprivileged. But in both his public and private life his moral struggles were legendary: he divorced his first wife, and developed a reputation for a time as a womaniser and heavy drinker.

Thousands lined the streets of Massachusetts as his cortège passed, and his funeral was a distinctly Catholic one, despite the Archdiocese of Boston receiving many calls and emails from conservative Catholics urging its cardinal, Sean O'Malley, to refuse the family one because of Mr Kennedy's support of abortion rights and gay marriage.

The Mass was held earlier in the day at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Boston. In attendance were President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden; three former presidents – George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter; Cardinal O'Malley; and a large number of congressmen, family friends and film stars.

The principal celebrant was Fr Donald Monan, SJ, the former president of Boston College and a long-time friend of the Kennedy family. Fr Mark Hession, also a close friend who often said Mass for the senator in his final days, preached the homily. Cardinal O'Malley paid tribute to Mr Kennedy in an online statement last week, describing him as "often a champion for the poor, the less fortunate and those seeking a better life".

GERMANY

Merkel pledges any new coalition will have Christian values

THE GERMAN Chancellor Angela Merkel said she hoped to have further "intensive" talks with Pope Benedict on shared interests such as social responsibility in the current recession, writes *Christa Pongratz-Lippitt*.

In an interview with the German Catholic news agency KNA, she said there were many issues in which she and Pope Benedict XVI had a common interest. Mrs Merkel publicly praised his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, saying it pointed the way forward in the global financial crisis.

Mrs Merkel said the "C" in her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) obliged her party to adhere to the Christian concept of humanity, and there would therefore be no further concessions on her part on such issues as stem-cell research, gay adoption rights or "living wills" if she won a second term in the 27 September general election. While the CDU has been part of the ruling coalition, MPs have introduced living wills that enable terminally ill patients to refuse treatment and have relaxed laws restricting research on embryonic cells.

Mrs Merkel could find her pledges difficult to deliver if she goes ahead with her plan to form a centre-Right coalition with the Free Democrats (FDP). The FDP was the first political party in Germany to favour allowing embryonic stem-cell research and supports gay adoption.

SPAIN

Locals hound monks from pilgrim village

A COMMUNITY of Benedictine monks had to be escorted by police from their monastery in Spain after inhabitants of a tiny Spanish village hurled insults at them and demanded they leave, writes *Graham Keeley*. Villagers in Rabanal del Camino in León, northern Spain, late last month ousted the six monks of Monte Irago, who have been forced to seek refuge at a monastery in Germany. Rabanal del Camino includes a refuge created by the Confraternity of St James in London used by pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago.

Police were called in to escort the monks from the village, which numbers 46 inhabitants. Villagers objected to monks' suggestions for changes to the local church. Jose Antonio Prieto, village council secretary, said: "They wanted to take away the clock, the bells, reduce the square and give more prominence to St Benedict. We have nothing against him [St Benedict] but he is not linked to the village."



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IN BRIEF

Vatican call to order

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) has instructed Italian bishops and religious order superiors to discipline more than 40 priests who publicly rejected the Vatican's ruling on euthanasia. The *Adista* Italian news weekly this week reported that the Vatican's doctrinal office is demanding that the prelates call 41 priests "to order and eventually punish them" for signing a petition last March to protest against living will legislation that forbids refusing patients hydration and nutrition.

Insomniac bishop retires

Pope Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, Pennsylvania for reasons of ill health, it was announced on Monday. Bishop Martino, 63, whose six-year tenure oversaw the closure of many Catholic schools and parishes, said at a press conference: "For some time now there has not been a clear consensus among the clergy and people of the Diocese of Scranton regarding my pastoral initiatives or my way of governance. This development has caused me great sorrow, resulting in bouts of insomnia and, at times, a crippling physical fatigue."

Jesuit's killer sentenced

Russia's Jesuits have expressed "profound disappointment" after a man was jailed for 14 years for the October 2008 Moscow murder of one of their priests but cleared of killing a second. "We do not believe justice has been done and are meeting lawyers to consider possible actions," the Independent Russian Jesuit Society said in a statement. Mikhail Orechov was sentenced for clubbing Fr Viktor Betancourt-Ruiz to death. Moscow City Court said it lacked evidence to convict Orechov of the murder of the Jesuits' German provincial, Fr Otto Messmer, who was also murdered.

Pope's climate change plea

Pope Benedict XVI has called on the world's most industrialised nations to have greater regard for the environment so that the poor are not left "paying the highest price for climate change".

Gulag spirituality

Russia's Orthodox patriarch has called for one of his country's most notorious prison complexes, the Solovetsky Islands on Russia's White Sea, to be turned into a spirituality and martyrdom study centre. The islands, home to one of Russia's largest monasteries, were turned into a labour camp after the 1917 revolution.

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Letter from Rome

It was inevitable. August in Italy could not give way to September before some sort of scandal involving the Vatican hit the papers. And like those of the past, this year's case is – as one Italian colleague put it – *una grande confusione!* It began with *Il Giornale*, a paper owned by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's family, allegedly "unmasking" the moral (that means sexual in this instance) hypocrisy of Dino Boffo, editor of *L'Avvenire*, the paper owned by the Italian Episcopal Conference – the CEI. It was payback for Mr Boffo daring to criticise Mr Berlusconi's notorious behaviour. The Italian Left, and some in the international press, have called this the PM's latest erratic attempt to silence his critics. And they maintain that, given the target, this has plunged his Government's relations with the Vatican and the CEI into the "deep freeze". Don't believe it for even a moment. This Church and this State need each other more than ever before. And my prediction – though I could be wrong – is that the relationship will emerge from this mess stronger than ever.

Dino Boffo, who is at the centre of the "scandal", is arguably the most powerful and influential layman in the Italian Church. He has not only been editor of the CEI-owned paper for the past 15 years, but he is also director of the bishops' national television station, Sat2000. Mr Boffo has the confidence and trust of numerous cardinals, bishops and other leading Catholic figures in the country. He knows many of them quite well. They have all rushed to his defence. So far there has been no plan for an inquiry into the allegations against Mr Boffo, although he has acknowledged that some of them such as the 2004 penal decree for phone harassment are true.

Fr Ladislav Örsy SJ, one of the world's most respected canon lawyers and theological minds, has called for "immediate" action to restore decision-making power to the laity. The 88-year-old Hungarian-born Jesuit recently published an article in the Italian Catholic journal, *Il Regno*, in which he argued that it was a "paradoxical situation" that the Second Vatican Council had "opened the doors to the increasing promotion of the laity" but that the 1983 Code of Canon Law had fully excluded them from "every important decisional process". He pointed out that depriving the laity from participation in the governance of the Church has been a gradual "reversal" of an "immemorial tradition". And he quoted Pope Pius IX to make his point. "The Mystical Body of Christ has become monstrous," the Pope told a group of

Canadian clerics in 1939. "The head has become enormous, but the body has shrunk." Now, if you think these are just the wistful ruminations of a retired canonist, you'd better think again. First of all, Fr Örsy is still teaching at Georgetown Law School and continues to write and give lectures all over the world. But even more importantly, a high-ranking Vatican official told me his recent article "on the laity and the Code" was "getting lots of attention" here in Rome. When Örsy speaks, people tend to listen, including even those who don't agree with him. In October the energetic octogenarian will publish his latest book – *Receiving the Council: theological and canonical insights and debates* – with Liturgical Press. The above-cited article on the laity is evidently in it, as is a famous series of exchanges between him and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when he was prefect of the Vatican's doctrinal office, on the 1998 *motu proprio*, *Ad Tuendam Fidem* ("To defend the faith"). Place your orders. This, too, is going to get some attention.

Unfortunately, open and respectful theological debate is not a hallmark of our current church environment – at least at an institutional or hierarchical level. So it was a late summer highlight to attend a few sessions of the Journées Romaines Dominicaines (JRD) here in Rome and take part in some serious conversations on issues that were not always agreed upon by everyone. It was also encouraging to witness the fraternity, respect and openness that such a vast and varied array of Dominican friars, sisters and laity displayed during these discussions. Of course, most people know that the Dominican Family (as the different components of the Order of Preachers call themselves corporately) has *Veritas* as its motto. But, perhaps, not everyone realises that the Dominicans believe "Truth" is something that must be continuously sought after. It is not something that is already possessed and, thus, must be obstinately defended at all costs. This humble and diligent quest for Truth was evident throughout the JRD sessions that I attended. It was especially noticeable in the courteous, yet sometimes challenging, way the Dominicans engaged Fr Peter Phan, who was their guest speaker. The JRD organisers were keen for him to share his insights, theological speculation and human experience. He showed himself to be a fellow seeker of Truth, just as interested in the views and experiences of the other participants. And Fr Phan has a great wit that balances his soaring intellect. As one of the friars told me, "These were great days." **Robert Mickens**