

Forum

Catholics condemn the sin of racism

NEW YORK -- At the request of Pope John Paul II, the Pontifical Commission for Peace and Justice of the Roman Catholic Church has issued an 8,000-word condemnation of racism as it exists throughout the world today. The document -- titled "The Church and Racism" -- affirms that racism is a sin and an affront to the Christian faith.

We are very pleased that the Catholic Church and its leadership are making this important pronouncement. Particularly in the United States, where there has been a rise in overt acts of racist violence during the last 10 years, this theological articulation against racism by the Catholic community is a welcome event.

It is important that both Protestants and Catholics join together in denouncing the evil of racism, which continues to plague the majority of the world's population.

The Pontifical Commission said: "Harboring racist thoughts and entertaining racist attitudes is a sin." Beyond thinking racist thoughts and exhibiting a racist attitude in one's personality, it is the acting out of these racist views in the social, economic, political and religious spheres of life that causes violence and harm to millions of persons around the world.

Yet it is interesting to note that the Catholic Church is now saying that to even have a racist thought in

one's mind is a sin. If this is the case, then, as we say in the Afro-American church tradition, "Lord have mercy, there is a whole lot of sin going on!"

Interestingly, the Catholic doc-

vocal and active position against the cruel manifestations of racism in Africa and in particular in southern Africa.

The Catholics were careful to footnote their involvement and con-



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By BENJAMIN CHAVIS JR.

ument affirmed: "The most obvious form of racism, in the strictest sense of the word, to be found today is institutionalized racism."

The racist apartheid regime of South Africa was singled out as "an extreme case of a vision of racial inequality." Accordingly, the sin of racism in apartheid South Africa has been made constitutional under law.

"The Church and Racism" pronouncement says that apartheid "is justified by an ideology of superiority of persons from European stock over those of African or Indian origin, which is, by some, supported by an erroneous interpretation of the Bible."

Given the fact that the Catholic Church is one of the fastest-growing churches on the African continent, it is important for the leadership of the church to take a strong

tributions to the victories of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s in the United States. As we are attempting now to revitalize that movement for freedom and justice, it is our hope that the church leaders of all denominations will join together anew for this great cause.

Whether or not there will be a mass repentance from the commission of the sin of racism as a result of this latest pronouncement from the Catholic Church remains to be seen. It is, however, a step in the right direction for church leaders to at least make the proper moral and theological challenges to the great evils of this age.

Benjamin F. Chavis Jr. is executive director of the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ.

The black health crisis in America

NEW YORK -- Life expectancy for whites continues to rise, while that for blacks declined for two years in a row, the first time that's happened in this century.

According to federal statistics, the typical newborn white baby can expect to live 75.4 years; the average black infant, 69.4 years. And the gap is growing.

Those figures signal a major health crisis among Afro-Americans, one that demands immediate federal action.

The report from the National Center for Health Statistics that came up with those figures found a rise in homicides and motor vehicle deaths as major contributors to the decline in life expectancy. That suggests that crime and drugs are taking an extraordinary toll on our communities and must be dealt with.

The social disorganization caused by deep poverty and discrimination has serious negative impacts on Afro-American health.

We know that higher black incidence of heart disease, strokes and certain forms of cancer have their origins in social causes. And we know that black infant mortality -- double the white rate -- is high because so many pregnant women

TO BE EQUAL

By JOHN E. JACOB

are poor and do not have access to quality health care.

The United States ranks last among the world's top 20 industrial nations in infant mortality, a shameful status that requires beefed-up federal and community programs to discourage teen-age pregnancy and to provide health care for disadvantaged pregnant women and infants.

It will probably come as a shock to most Americans who think that Medicaid solved the issue of access to health care to learn that most poor people are not covered by Medicaid.

A dozen years ago, it served only about two-thirds of the poor; today, only a little more than a third of poor people are enrolled in Medicaid. Tightened eligibility requirements and attempts to control costs have made Medicaid a promise, not a reality. So we need national eligibility standards that assure Medicaid coverage for all poor people.

Another barrier to access to health care is a lack of private or employer-paid health insurance. Some 37 million Americans -- one out of every six -- don't have health

insurance. Another 50 million have inadequate coverage -- policies that don't cover major medical expenses.

People in low-wage jobs do not usually get adequate insurance coverage, although they need it most. Nearly half of all uninsured adults are in the labor force, and most of them earn less than \$10,000. They can't afford to buy their own coverage, and they are often ineligible for Medicaid.

Afro-American citizens are three times as likely as whites to be poor, so they form a disproportionate part of the uninsured population and of the people in poverty who are denied Medicaid coverage.

There's no need to look for exotic explanations of the decline in black life expectancy. Poverty and discrimination increase stress and create situations in which people become prey to illness or to dangerous behavioral patterns, and society's refusal to provide health insurance for the poor denies them access to health care.

The result -- a public health crisis that needs to go to the top of the new administration's agenda.

John E. Jacob is president of the National Urban League.

Schools: Be fair to teen parents

WASHINGTON -- We know that it would be better if our teenagers did not become pregnant or have children until they have finished school. We also know that many of them, unfortunately, do not wait.

And it is absolutely crucial to the future survival of these young mothers -- yes, and these young fathers -- that their schools treat them fairly, and try to help them stay in school and delay having additional children until they get on their economic feet.

It isn't just our compassion and common sense that dictate decent treatment for the pregnant and parenting teens in school. It's the law. A federal law, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, protects these students from discrimination.

We, as parents and taxpayers, can make sure our local school makes the grade in how it treats young parents. As a first step, find out the answers to the following crucial questions, excerpted from a checklist developed by Margaret Dunkle and Maggie Nash of the

CHILDWATCH

By MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Equality Center, based in Washington. Does your school, principal or staff:

- Expel or suspend a student for being pregnant?
- Push pregnant students into a special class, program or school?

- Exclude boys from parenting classes?

- Deny pregnant or parenting students honors, such as being valedictorian, receiving special awards, getting certain scholarships, being on the honor roll or participating in graduation?

- Give a student a poor recommendation (or refuse to give a recommendation) for a scholarship, a job or continued schooling because of pregnancy or parenthood?

- Counsel any girl who is pregnant or a mother -- or any boy who is a father -- not to go to college or get further training?

- Put restrictions on teen-age mothers that aren't also put on teen-age fathers?

- Require a young mother to return to school after a certain number of weeks, rather than allowing the time her doctor says she needs?

- Deny an excused absence for prenatal care or for medical care after the baby is born?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, think about ways to work with others in your community to improve your school's performance in this area.

For a complete copy of the checklist "Does Your School Make the Grade?" send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the Equality Center, Suite 250, 220 Eye St., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

Marian Wright Edelman is a National Newspaper Publishers Association columnist who is president of the Children's Defense Fund, a national voice for youth.

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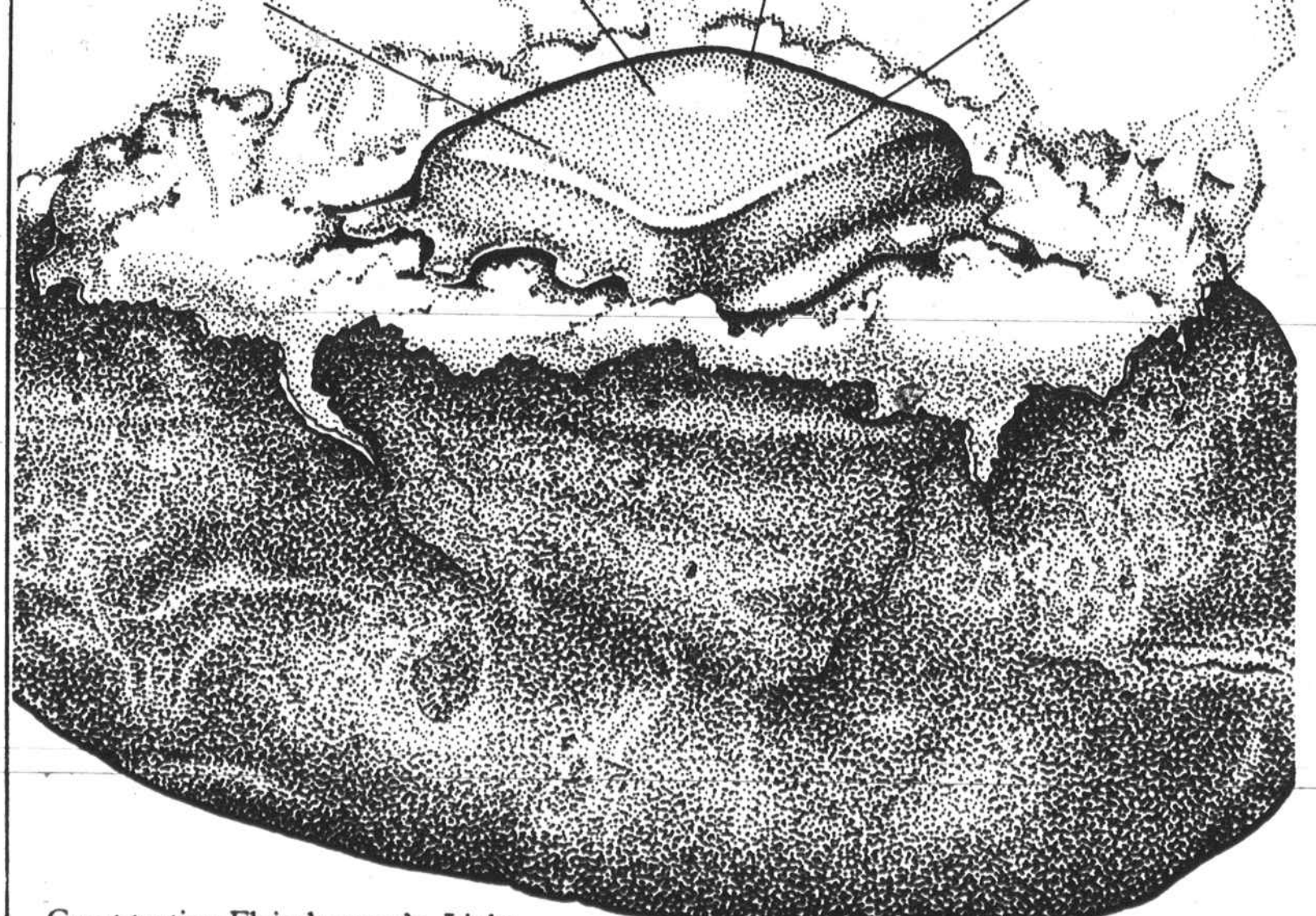
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