

Pope John Paul II: Same-sex unions 'degrade' marriage

By Nicole Winfield
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II urged authorities Saturday to stop approving gay marriages, saying they "degrade" the true sense of marriage between a man and a woman.

It was the second time in a week the pontiff has raised the issue, which is making headlines in the United States as gay couples marry in cities like San Francisco

and New Paltz, N.Y.

The California Supreme Court on Friday also declined a request to immediately stop San Francisco from marrying gay couples and to nullify the weddings already performed. More than 3,400 gay couples have tied the knot in San Francisco.

John Paul said a family-based on marriage between a man and a woman was a pillar of society that justly had rights and duties specific to it.

"This is a time in which there is no lack of attempts to reduce marriage to a mere individual contract, with characteristics very different from those that belong to marriage and the family, and that end up degrading it as if it were a form of accessory association within the social body," he said.

John Paul urged all public authorities, but particularly Catholic ones, to stop approving such laws, saying they

should not contribute to legislation contrary to "the primary and essential norms that regulate moral life."

Authorities must instead protect laws that favor the family "knowing that they promote a social development that is just, stable and promising," he said.

The pope made the comments as the new ambassador of Argentina to the Holy See presented his credentials. In 2002, the city of

Buenos Aires passed a law extending certain civil rights like health insurance and pension rights to same-sex couples the first Latin American city to adopt such a measure.

Last year, the Vatican launched a global campaign against gay marriages in a bid to stem the tide of widening legal recognition for same-sex unions in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

John Paul has pressed his point on several occasions since then. On Thursday, he called for the support of the "authentic" Christian family, which he defined as being based on marriage between a man and a woman.

The debate has spilled into the U.S. presidential race, with President Bush saying this week he would back a federal constitutional amendment barring such marriages.

'Passion' gives Christian merchandising sales a big boost

By Leila Atassi
THE RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

MAPLE HEIGHTS, Ohio — A line of merchandise to accompany the release of Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," which depicts the horrific last hours of Jesus' life, has Christian bookstores scrambling to keep displays stocked.

In addition to the T-shirts, the Rainbow Family Book Center here, for example, co-owned by David and Alice Wilson, offers a coffee-table picture book with scenes from the movie, pewter pocket reminders and prayer cards inspired by the film.

They also have the official "The Passion of the Christ" jewelry line, marketed by

Bob Siemon, the creator of the "What Would Jesus Do?" jewelry. It includes bracelets, lapel pins and necklaces, the most popular of which has been a 2-inch-long pewter nail pendant, meant to be a replica of nails used in the Crucifixion.

An estimated 75,000 nail pendants, which come harnessed to leather cords, have been shipped to vendors across the country, according to The Associated Press.

The new iconography of the nail might serve to sensitize Christians to the gruesomeness of the Crucifixion and, more generally, the violence suffered globally on a daily basis, said Doris Donnelly, professor of religious studies

at John Carroll University.

The crucifix was once embedded with jewels and emphasized the beauty of the Resurrection, because in the Middle Ages, seeing the suffering of Jesus was not an effective evangelical instrument to inspire people to become Christian," she said. "The crucifix alone does not emphasize the sense of horror that accompanies the act of Crucifixion."

However, Donnelly worries that the fundamental meaning of the nail might be shuf-

fled in with the kitschy accouterments affiliated with Gibson and his contributions to pop culture.

But young shoppers such as Nicole Ramseur and LaTonya Walker, both of whom have tattoos of a cross or the likeness of Jesus on their backs, agree that the nail pendant has breathed new life into the expression of sympathy for Jesus' suffering.

"The symbolism of the cross is so watered down now," Ramseur said. "Everyone

wears the cross, even those who don't go to church. We needed something that speaks louder than the cross. And the nail is what was used to put him there."

Wilson said carrying the merchandise shows his store's support of Gibson, whom the Wilsons heard speak at last year's Christian Booksellers International Convention in Orlando, Fla. "I had my reservations as to whether he was a Christian until I heard him speak," Wilson said. "But he really has a

commitment to the Lord, and selling these products and seeing the film is our way of showing support for what the Lord has done through him."

Wilson also said he doesn't believe the pervasiveness of popular culture in the merchandise undermines the more spiritual aspects of its message. "Younger people are looking for different ways to express their faith," he said. "That's the point of what we're doing. Everything we sell here has a message, and we hope it changes lives."

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