Most Reverend Anthony Michael Pilla, 
President, U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops

‘We don’t believe in future life, we believe in eternal life—and we’re already experiencing it’

Bishop Anthony Pilla was elected president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in November 1995, after having served as vice-president for the previous three years. As president, he presides over the meetings of the Bishops, over the administrative committee for the conference, is chairman of the executive committee, and gives oversight to the staff of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C.

Bishop Pilla was born in 1932, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1959. In June 1979, Pope John Paul II announced his choice of Rev. Pilla as Titular Bishop of Scardona and Auxiliary Bishop of Cleveland, Ohio, and in January 1981, he was installed as the Ninth Bishop of Cleveland.

Bishop Pilla was interviewed for Fidelio by Nina Ogden at the National Lay Forum in Cleveland, Ohio, which was sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/Committee on the Laity. The interview was conducted on October 11. A previous interview with Bishop Pilla appeared in the Spring 1996 issue of Fidelio.

Fidelio: In the same issue of Fidelio, in which this interview will appear, we examine the question of “time reversal.” In re-reading the Pope’s Apostolic Letter, “Toward the Third Millennium,” I became aware that John Paul situated the Jubilee in this context, of the future acting on the present. He wrote: “Speaking of the birth of the Son of God, St. Paul places this event in the ‘fullness of time.’ Time is indeed fulfilled by the very fact that God, in the Incarnation, came down into human history.”

Bishop Pilla: The future shapes our present lives. The danger is to live in the future, thinking that you don’t have to act in the present. It’s very important to focus in the present moment, rejoice in the present moment. The reality we see is the present day, but that is not the whole reality.

Fidelio: Pope John Paul, in the letter, says, the present is a “plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in Heaven and things on Earth. . . . Christ is the Alpha and the Omega.”

Bishop Pilla: The Holy Father, in raising the theological point of view—that’s an eternal perspective. It’s unity, all One. We experience it sequentially. We should always have a vision of the eternal, or the unity of time. That’s where hope is based.

Jesus made it pretty clear: You don’t love God, if you don’t love your brothers and sisters. . . . What are we doing to bring about justice? What are we doing to eradicate poverty? Are we making a difference? Or, do we buy all the rhetoric, that every poor person is a ‘welfare junkie,’ and all that nonsense?

There’s no question about the triumph of the Gospel, but in each moment our perspective is very important. That’s very key, very key—because you’re talking about eternal reality here. We’re just one part of that, but it’s the whole thing that we’re engaged in; and we have our part to play in the whole salvation history, and our part is very important. We’re part of that, because Christ is salvation and participating in the whole salvific event is what’s tremendous here. So nothing is really insignificant; everything we do is “big stuff,” cumulatively, in the mystical body. The Pope is so pro-
found and so poetic—that’s what he’s talking about—and he’s very conscious of his role, and he wants us to be conscious of our own.

It’s not such a complicated thing; it’s the root of responsibility. By identifying Christ present in our life now, we are in the future, in a sense. We’re already there, because we don’t believe in future life, we believe in eternal life; and we’re already experiencing it in ways that are very important. So, we don’t have to wait; we experience eternal life now. Heaven is a fulfillment of this. We don’t have to wait for some ideal Church, as some people do. We don’t have to be sad and grumpy, waiting for something ideal; we can rejoice.

Fidelio: I thought it was crucial that he developed time in this way.

Bishop Pilla: That’s why he set the focus in the first year on the Incarnation. Unless you understand the Incarnation—Christ assumed human form as a slave—you would miss the whole thing. That was Christ’s role in his human existence: to put us in touch with the divine. There’s always the Trinitarian reality there; through Christ we are in touch with the unifying mystery of God.

Fidelio: John Paul says, “Against this background we can understand the custom of the Jubilee. . . . In the sabbatical year [every seventh year—Ed.], in addition to the freeing of slaves, the Law also provided for the cancellation of debts in accordance with precise regulations. And all this was done for the Glory of God. What was true for the sabbatical year was also true for the jubilee year, which fell every fifty years. In the jubilee year, however, the customs of the sabbatical year were broadened.” He speaks very specifically about “reducing significantly, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.” He, of course, talks about Paul VI’s Populorum Progressio, and that “development is the new name for peace.” This brings to mind Bosnia, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and the situation in the entire Third World.

Bishop Pilla: Of course, we must take the concept of this legislation and apply it to the realities of our time: Africa, the Third World debt, and the terrible oppression it’s causing, and the violence. We focus on those tragic situations. And look at our urban situation. This is where we have to be careful that it’s not something simply theoretical. How does this reality inform our situation? That theology has to inform our behavior. How does this impact on our behavior, so that our behavior is Christ-like.

We have to be very careful because, sometimes, religion is a way of rationalizing away our responsibility: “I had this encounter with Jesus and I’m O.K.” Well, that’s not what the Gospel says. The vertical has to be complemented by the horizontal, otherwise it’s not true Gospel, in our tradition. Jesus made that pretty clear: You don’t love God, if you don’t love your brothers and sisters. So we were talking in very deep terms, initially, about the Incarnation, but the proof of the pudding now, is how that is lived out in these issues. What are we doing to make for less violence? What are we doing to bring about justice? What are we doing to eradicate poverty? And you must ask, what can you do, and what are you doing? Are we getting involved? Are we making a difference? Or, do we buy all the rhetoric, you know, that every poor person is a “welfare junkie,” and all that nonsense?

Fidelio: I wanted to ask a specific question, along those lines, about the scandal that the crack-cocaine epidemic emanated from the White House Special Situation Group responsible for Iran-Contra.

Bishop Pilla: I don’t totally know where the truth lies. I’m not privy to all the information. I’ve read everything I could about it. If it’s true, I don’t know how you justify it; that’s expediency at its worst. Can you justify all that by national interest? The national interest must involve the whole society. What about the people victimized by drugs? Shouldn’t there be complementarity between the needs of people, foreign policy, and national interest? And what about the integrity of our government?

Fidelio: There are growing calls for investigation.

Bishop Pilla: We are in the forefront of most issues concerning justice. We haven’t been invited to investigate, because of the tradition in the U.S. of the “separation of Church and state.” There’s reluctance to have the Church involved in any such role, lest that principle be violated. Not that I agree with that. Churches should be involved in civil affairs, without having to be part of the government. The Church will get involved in this vital question. We will say something about this. We’re concerned. If we would be asked to investigate, we would want to do that.

Fidelio: The last time I interviewed you, I asked about the Pope’s call for a Synod for the Americas. The Latin American bishops have, of course, repeatedly called for debt relief.

Bishop Pilla: That’s what’s being worked on now. We’re involved in the process now. The discussion is in two parts. One is evangelization: How can we make the Church more present to her people, and share it with others? The other part is economic and social justice. We’re discussing what we can do in our political contexts to alleviate some of the injustice. This will come out in the final working group.

They accuse us of being hysterical about ‘the slippery slope.’ Well, it is a slippery slope. . . . Who’s going to make these decisions? Will they kill the elderly? The handicapped? People who are not in their peer group? Once you establish this principle, where does it end? We’ve seen that historically. We must be opposed to these things.
Fidelio: Which is scheduled sometime soon, I believe?
Bishop Pilla: Sometime after April.

Fidelio: I want to read you something a particular Congressman said criticizing the excellent statement the National Conference of Bishops issued on political responsibility last year. This Congressman published an essay stating, “I must take respectful exception to a formulation in the United States Catholic Conference’s new statement on political responsibility in the forthcoming election year. Speaking in the name of the Bishops, the conference document says this: ‘We stand with the unborn and the undocumented when the politicians seem to be abandoning them. We defend children in the womb and on welfare. We oppose the violence of abortion and the vengeance of capital punishment.’”

Bishop Pilla: He’s in opposition? Why?

Fidelio: He says, “I’ll leave the substance of the issues of immigration reform, welfare reform, and capital punishment for another day. They are important issues; they are controversial. But I do regret the suggestion of moral equivalence contained in the form of the United States Catholic Conference statement. . . . I’m afraid this is more than a mere stylistic difference of opinion: it’s an affirmation of the seamless-garment metaphor which is based on, in my opinion, an unwarranted moral equivalence.”

Bishop Pilla: The Bishops are not talking about the particulars of equivalence. They’re talking about things that are basic and fundamental. Your integrity about all life issues is important here. You have to change people’s minds. We are concerned about the right to all of life. I don’t think the Bishops have ever said anything about equal issues. But they are issues, and to ignore these other issues because one is primary, is doing a disservice to the Gospel—because the Gospel speaks of all of it. And should we not talk about parts of the Gospel?

Fidelio: The Schiller Institute is addressing the questions of cuts in health care, and assisted suicide, and social security, by the Nuremberg Code criteria: as dangerous crimes against humanity.

Bishop Pilla: That’s tremendous. Basically, going back to what we’ve said: Whose province is this, humanity’s or God’s? These are dangerous precedents here. They always accuse us of being hysterical about “the slippery slope.” Well, it is a slippery slope, and we’d better stop it now, or the crimes you’re talking about will become more and more possible. Who’s going to make these decisions? Will they kill the elderly? The handicapped? People who are not in their peer group? Once you establish this principle, where does it end? We’ve seen that. We’ve seen it historically. Once established, it goes to places you may not want it to go, nor should it go. We must be opposed to these things.

Going back to your other question: Sometimes when people say that the Bishops do or don’t do things, what they really mean is, we don’t do it the way they want to do it. That doesn’t mean we’re wrong. We may differ, but it doesn’t necessarily mean we’re wrong. We’re noted for our pro-life stand, and criticized for being so focussed on it, and so forth. We are not the enemy. We ought to focus on other people. Don’t make the Bishops and the Church’s authority the enemy. Our enemies rejoice in this. It doesn’t help the cause by saying the Bishops aren’t doing it right—our enemies love that.

Fidelio: The economist who won the Nobel Prize in 1992, Gary Becker, has spoken on several occasions at forums sponsored by the Pontifical Academy on the Family. He uses the buzz words...
Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard, Bishop of Albany, N.Y.

‘I’m emphasizing the sacredness of all aspects of human life’

Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, who was born in Troy, N.Y. in 1938, was ordained to the priesthood in Rome, Italy in 1963 and became the ninth Roman Catholic Bishop of Albany, New York in 1977.

Soon after he became a priest, he co-founded the Hope House Drug Rehabilitation facility, which now, thirty years later, serves eight thousand people yearly in residential, outpatient, community, and school-based programs.

When capital punishment was reinstated in New York State in 1994, the Bishop helped organize “New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty” and he now serves as its president. He is active in many other civic projects, and is the president of the Urban League of Albany.

Bishop Hubbard is the chairman of the Public Policy Committee of the N.Y. Catholic Conference and, among his national responsibilities, serves on the Social Policy and World Peace Committee of the U.S. Catholic Conference and the Committee on the Laity of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Fidelio: How did you become involved in the Catholic lay community?”

Bishop Hubbard: The Catholic lay community became a part of my life when I was about 13 years old and I was in a Catholic high school. I was very active in the lay community, and that’s where I got involved with the lay community.

Fidelio: Did you feel that you were part of the Catholic community when you were growing up?”

Bishop Hubbard: Yes, I did. I always felt like a part of the Catholic community, and I feel that I am a part of the Catholic community today.

Fidelio: Do you feel that the Catholic lay community is strong today?”

Bishop Hubbard: Yes, I do. I think that the Catholic lay community is very strong and that it is very important. It is important to have a strong Catholic lay community.

Fidelio: What would you say is the most important thing that the Catholic lay community can do?”

Bishop Hubbard: I think that the most important thing that the Catholic lay community can do is to be involved in the life of the Church. It is important to be involved in the life of the Church and to be a part of the Church.

Fidelio: How can the Catholic lay community be involved in the life of the Church?”

Bishop Hubbard: There are many ways that the Catholic lay community can be involved in the life of the Church. They can be involved by attending Mass, by being involved in the life of the parish, and by being involved in the life of the Church.

Fidelio: What is the role of the Catholic lay community in the Church?”

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