

The Dawn of Darkness?

Vatican Warns of New Age Dangers

by Andrew Walther

ROME – The Vatican's new document is badly needed, says Jesuit Father Mitch Pacwa, who says he once "dabbled in" New Age practices. People who get involved with New Age activities run serious risks, said the host of "EWTN Live" and author of a book on New Age beliefs and practices.

The Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue on Feb. 3 released a provisional document titled "*Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian reflection on the New Age.*" It warned Catholics to exercise caution and discernment in dealing with a variety of fairly common practices involving yoga, crystals and Enneagram personality type indicators because these activities can be in conflict with Catholic doctrine.

"First, you can lose money, not just your faith." Father Pacwa said of the practices, explaining that the New Age seminars that teach them are very costly. "Don't pay to make yourself dumb." The patchwork of beliefs that make up the New Age is full of old heresies and could be dangerous to one's faith, the Vatican warned in the document, which reiterated previous warnings about the dangers of occultism and provided a detailed lexicon of New Age terms. The work is targeted to "those engaged in pastoral work so that they might be able to explain how the New Age movement differs from the Christian faith."

I was really pleased to see the Vatican speak on this issue," said Johnette Benkovic, author of *The New Age Counterfeit* and founder and president of Living His Life Abundantly, a Catholic media ministry in Florida. Benkovic, who said she has been monitoring the New Age movement since 1988, is worried the New Age mentality has become so mainstream that "it is almost imperceptible to millions of Catholics." She agreed with the document's identification of the major sources of New Age thinking: "Eastern oriental mysticism, Western occultism — especially Gnosticism — and the 'human potential movement.'"

What New Age?

One problem with New Age thinking is that it is constantly changing, experts say. While it is easy to point to the roots of New Age thinking, it is more difficult to keep up with its constantly changing manifestations. "What the movement is now is not what it will be in six months," said Benkovic, who interviewed for her book many people involved in New Age and the fight against it. The Vatican document referred to New Age as a "very complex and elusive phenomenon." Yet there are some common trends, according to the document. These include the following ideas:

- The cosmos as an organic whole."
- An "energy, which is also identified as the divine soul or spirit."
- The "medication of various spiritual entities."
- "Humans ... ascending to visible higher spheres, and ... controlling their own lives beyond death."
- "Perennial knowledge, which predates and is superior to all religions and cultures."
- "People following enlightened masters."

Some within the Church, however, do not find such practices worrisome. Dominican Father Cletus Wessels, author of *The Holy Web: Church and the New Universe Story*, said although he had not read the new document, he is not worried about New Age ideas. I've been accused of being New Age. Lots of people are," said Father Wessels, who taught theology for 18 years at the Aquinas Institute, a graduate school of theology in St. Louis. "The Vatican is swiping at these and other little things that are bothering them," he said, "but we are coming into contact with new things and there is a desire to explore them."

The document warned, however, that "even if it can be admitted that New Age religiosity in some way responds to the legitimate spiritual longing of human nature, it must be acknowledged that its attempts to do so run counter to Christian revelation." The document warns those teaching New Age ideas within the Church should stop doing so because of conflicts with Catholicism. It stated: "There are too many cases where Catholic centers of spirituality are

actively involved in diffusing New Age religiosity in the Church. This would of course have to be corrected, to stop the spread of confusion and error . . . [and] so that they might be effective in promoting true Christian spirituality."

Risky Practices

Father Pacwa, whose book *Catholics and the New Age: How Good People are being drawn into Jungian Psychology, the Enneagram and the New Age of Aquarius* was recommended by the Vatican document, has four warnings for those interested in New Age. He warned that the variety of alternative medicines New Age proponents focus on have as little chance of success as typical treatments, and some, he said, are downright dangerous.

New Age activities can lead people to "dabble in the occult and become obsessed with occult power," he said. Worst of all, he warned that practitioners of New Age activity can lose their sense of good and evil by becoming "caught up in pantheism — the idea that everything is god, so everything is good. Not being judgmental becomes all-important," the priest said.

Father Pacwa cited the example of two abortion doctors who justified their activity with the New Age mentality that "abortions help the babies go to a better place because [the babies] had bad karma." All sorts of sins then become justifiable, he said, noting that some have used New Age ideas to justify the actions of Hitler and Stalin. Benkovic warned that dabbling in New Age activities "can begin to dilute our Catholic faith." In the worst cases those involved can run the risk of experiences with the demonic, she said.

Retired Bishop Donald Montrose, who wrote a pastoral letter on the New Age and the occult when he was bishop of Stockton, Calif., from 1986-1999, also advised Catholics to stay away from such practices and ideas "because it makes allowance for another power." It's "deeper" than superstition, he added. What the new Vatican document suggests is that "you have to [look at your] understanding and worldview to see if it is in concert with the Catholic faith." Benkovic said. And Father Pacwa noted wryly that the reason the New Age is constantly changing from one "fad to another is simple: It doesn't work. G.K. Chesterton was right, he said, noting: "When somebody doesn't believe in God, they don't believe in nothing — they believe in anything.

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