

INTERVIEW

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

‘You must measure a country by the way it treats its most needy’

*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 on Nov. 12, 1932, to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Italy as teenagers. He was educated in public schools in Cleveland until high school, which he began at Cathedral Latin School and completed at St. Gregory Seminary in Cincinnati, where he continued in college until Borromeo College Seminary opened in Wickliffe, Ohio. His preparation was completed in Cleveland at St. Mary Seminary, and he was ordained to the priesthood on May 23, 1959. His training also includes a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and a Master of Arts in History from John Carroll University, as well as numerous honorary degrees.*

*Pope John Paul II announced his choice of Father Pilla as Titular Bishop of Scardona and Auxiliary Bishop of Cleveland on June 30, 1979. On January 6, 1981, he was installed as the Ninth Bishop of Cleveland.*

*Bishop Pilla was interviewed for *Fidelio* by Nina Ogden on Jan. 3, 1996.*

**Fidelio:** Bishop Pilla, you were elected president of the Bishops Conference right at the point of the first Federal government shutdown. The bishops had

sent an unusually blunt letter to every U.S. representative and senator, saying if the Congress does not reject this fatally flawed legislation, we urge the President to veto it. President Clinton had asked you to come to the White House and discuss this. Can you tell us something of your discussion with the President?

**Bishop Pilla:** Basically, we discussed my letter and our concern about those whom, at that time, the proposed budget resolution would negatively impact, especially the elderly, the poor children, single parents.

**Fidelio:** The day before the Bishops Conference opened, you addressed a special Washington, D.C. convocation on evangelization, and your remarks were oriented toward the Jubilee. When we last spoke, our issue of *Fidelio* was dedicated to the Jubilee. I would like you to expand on your thoughts.

**Bishop Pilla:** We were encouraging the bishops to prepare for the Jubilee according to the guidelines that were sent to us by the Holy See, focussing on that particular celebration, where there



is an opportunity for renewal within the Church in the United States. Hopefully, rather than doing some things on a national level, we were urging the bishops to do that on the local level—because that’s where the Church is being experienced by most of our people—in the use of the time for prayer, and renewal, and recommitment to the mission of the Church.

**Fidelio:** In your speech on evangelization, you called Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “one of the greatest American evangelizers.” The vice-chairman of the Schiller Institute is Amelia Boynton Robinson, who is one of the great Civil Rights heroines. I’m sure she would be very interested in your view of Dr. King.

**Bishop Pilla:** I think at this time in our

history, it's of particular importance for us to focus on one of his principal messages, of peace. We have to be peaceful people. Even if we're looking for social change and we want to combat the injustices of our time, it has to be done in a peaceful way. I think that's a message our modern world needs to learn, because we see so much violence and hatred in our world, always justified by what's projected as a noble cause. But I think that Dr. King's message is, that if we're going to be consistent with the Gospel, even though we must reject the injustice, we always have to do it the way Christ did it, which would be in a peaceful way.

**We are not a political bloc. We are not aligned to any political party, nor do we have a partisan agenda in mind. The primary role of the Church is to advocate on the part of those who need it the most—and those who need it the most are the poor in this country. If we don't advocate for them, who will?**

**Fidelio:** And he really did move people's souls to that, didn't he?

**Bishop Pilla:** Yes, and if we could only resolve our differences in a peaceful way, I think much of the agony of the world would be addressed.

**Fidelio:** I'd like to ask you something specific about the encyclical *As The Third Millennium Draws Near*. In Section 38, the Pope calls for continental synods. He says that the Latin American bishops and the bishops of North America have agreed to hold a synod for the Americas. He talks about the fact that this is specifically important, that this will "look at the problems of the new evangelization in both parts of the same continent, so different in origin, and history, and on issues of justice and of international economic relations, in view of the enormous gap between North and South." Is there a particular plan now for this synod of the Americas, which would seem very important?

**Bishop Pilla:** We are just in the planning stages. There have been several meetings. There will be another one in

February. So the particular agenda of the synod hasn't been completed, but the various Conferences of Canada, the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean are meeting to develop that. So we're in the process of doing that. They set a theme at the previous meeting, but the agenda has not been set.

**Fidelio:** Do you know when that synod would take place?

**Bishop Pilla:** I think around 1998, but I'm not sure it's absolutely certain.\*

**Fidelio:** I toured Philadelphia with the former Vice Prime Minister of what is now, the former post-Communist Czechoslovakia. He was very happy to

see the inscription on the Liberty Bell, from *Leviticus 25*: "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land." Did you know that was on the Liberty Bell?

**Bishop Pilla:** No, I didn't. That's wonderful.

**Fidelio:** Yes, what a thought for the Jubilee preparations, that the symbol of the liberty bell is a call for "the cancellation of all debts in accordance with precise regulations," as Pope John Paul II says in *As The Third Millennium Draws Near*. I think it's an important theme for the West, and for those in eastern Europe who had such hopes when they overthrew communism, and then were subjected to the other form of material-

\* The pre-Synodal council met in Rome in October to consider the overall theme for the Special Synod for the Americas. The U.S. representative to the council was Cardinal Keeler, then the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The council made a recommendation to the Pope on the theme for the Synod, which has not yet been made public. Bishop Pilla will represent the United States at the next meeting of the pre-Synodal council in Rome in mid-February.—Ed.

ism—what Pope Leo XIII warned of in *Rerum Novarum*, that of liberal or Manchester capitalism, although it's called "shock therapy" this time around.

In light of this, and reflecting the government shutdown crisis we are experiencing now, I would like to ask you about the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the victimization of the poor.

**Bishop Pilla:** That's one of our concerns and that's why we spoke out. We have a long history—this is not something new. Unfortunately, every time the Bishops speak to this, we're always identified with a particular political agenda, or some people want to cast us as advocates of one party against the other. That shows a lack of understanding of our history, and of our consistent history in social justice. We are not a political bloc. We are not aligned to any political party, nor do we have a partisan agenda in mind. We're just trying to be very consistent with the teaching we have tried to be faithful to over the years, and I think the record shows that we have.

So, I think once again, the primary role of the Church is to advocate on the part of those who need it the most—and those who need it the most are the poor in this country. If we don't advocate for them, who will? I think that's where we need to be. We need to call people again to step aside from all these partisan agendas and look to the welfare of the country, because, as we've said consistently, if you're going to measure any country, you've got to measure it by the way it treats its most needy.

**Fidelio:** This particular compassion is something that you personally have always been known for.

**Bishop Pilla:** We try, because I think that is the role of the Church. We're concerned about all people. Certainly all people merit the concern and compassion of the Church and yet, as our Holy Father has reminded us, we have to have this preferential option for the poor, because, again, they don't have a constituency, and within our system, the way it works, those who have advocates and can plead a cause usually prevail. Well, who's going to plead for them, if we don't?

**Fidelio:** I don't know if you've yet seen the Winter issue of *Fidelio*. On the cover is the very startling picture by Rembrandt of Belshazzar seeing "the handwriting on the wall." Don't you think that the times we're in right now are reminiscent of Belshazzar's Feast?

**Bishop Pilla:** Yes, I can see that perspective.

I think every moment of history has its own unique character. I think

there are other moments in history of similar situations, but I think we're so much more aware because it's *our* time, and I think we sense it. It's very difficult for me to say if it's better or worse than Biblical times, because that's an historical perspective. But I think *in our times*, I'm deeply, deeply concerned about them—because there is an attitude of hardness, I think, that concerns me. This is not a throwaway society. You don't have people we should ignore and hope that they will go away. *They're our brothers and sisters* and we have a responsibility to them.

**Fidelio:** I thought about this when I read your statement on evangelization, where you said, "hopefully, we Catholics living in the U.S. at a time of chaos can return to a culture of beauty, to new art, architecture, literature, and music," and that you were specific about that.

**Bishop Pilla:** Yes, because I think that's been a great tradition of the Church. The humanities have always been a great part of the Church: art, music, all of those things have kept us human. I think in this technological age, this efficient age, this bottom-line age, we can't forget the human part of the thing, we can't be driven by all of that. That's what concerns me a little bit, about some of the rhetoric. Everyone's worried about efficiency, and everyone's worried about economic factors, but there are



other, human factors that we have to take into consideration. For the Church, efficiency has never been its primary objective; charity has been. So, while other institutions have to work on the efficiency part, our contribution is the charity part. So, hopefully, we can create a greater balance.

**Fidelio:** I was particularly struck by your statement. The Schiller Institute has investigated the process leading to the Council of Florence and the Brotherhood of the Common Life's education of poor and orphaned children, out of which what we know as the Renaissance created a recovery from the Dark Ages. At that time of beauty and discovery, there was a remarkable rise in population, and the productive capability of that population, which for the first time in human history eliminated serfdom for the majority of human beings.

**Bishop Pilla:** I think most of corporate America knows that too. Because many times, when you're dealing for top management, you do look for a portfolio that includes more than a particular skill or expertise. They're looking for the fullness, and they have found, I think, most of them, that if that portfolio is deficient in the humanities and in the arts, you're not going to get a complete human being, and perhaps not the best kind of performance when it comes to the goals that I think any institution wants to

**Look at the issues: We're running into a lack of compassion, a lack of human kindness. That's what the Church brings to the the table. That's why some people try to dismiss us, as idealistic or naive, or less charitably, as medieval, out-of-touch. Because, if you don't like the message, the easiest way is to destroy the messenger.**

accomplish in our day.

I think if we look at many of the issues, some of the things that we're running into indicate a lack of compassion, a lack of human kindness, a lack of heart, if you will. Perhaps, if we had a greater balance in our makeup and in our values, I think much of the ills of the world would be addressed.

I think that's what the Church always brings to the the table. That's why some people are uncomfortable with us, and try to dismiss us, maybe as idealistic or naive, or less charitably, as medieval, out-of-touch, irrelevant. Because sometimes, if you don't like the message, the easiest way is to minimize or destroy the messenger.

**Fidelio:** What are your great hopes for the New Year?

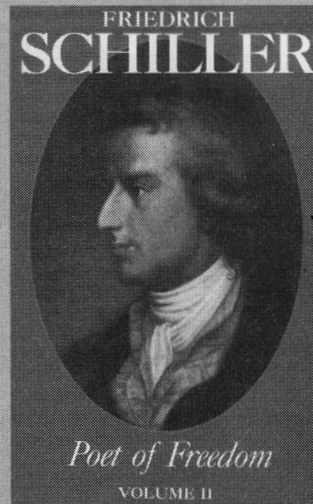
**Bishop Pilla:** My great hope for the New Year, I keep coming back to this thing: Every new year is another opportunity for each of us individually and as a society to try to be what God wants us to be, and this is something we have to strive for. We never achieve it, but every year we have to renew our efforts to be consistent with who we say we are. My hope is that every Catholic person, every Christian person, will take serious time to assess the authenticity of their living out of the Gospel message and make a new beginning.

**Fidelio:** Thank you, Bishop Pilla.

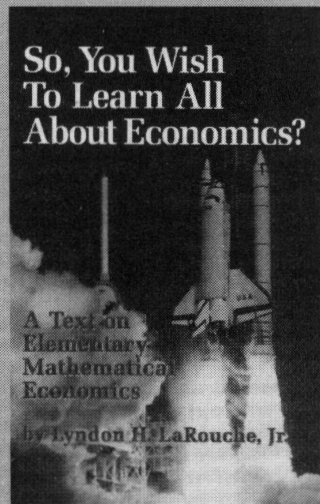


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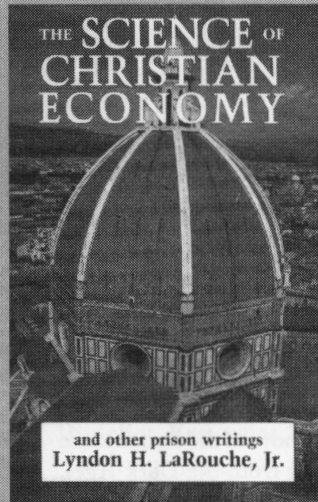
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