

## INTERVIEWS

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.*

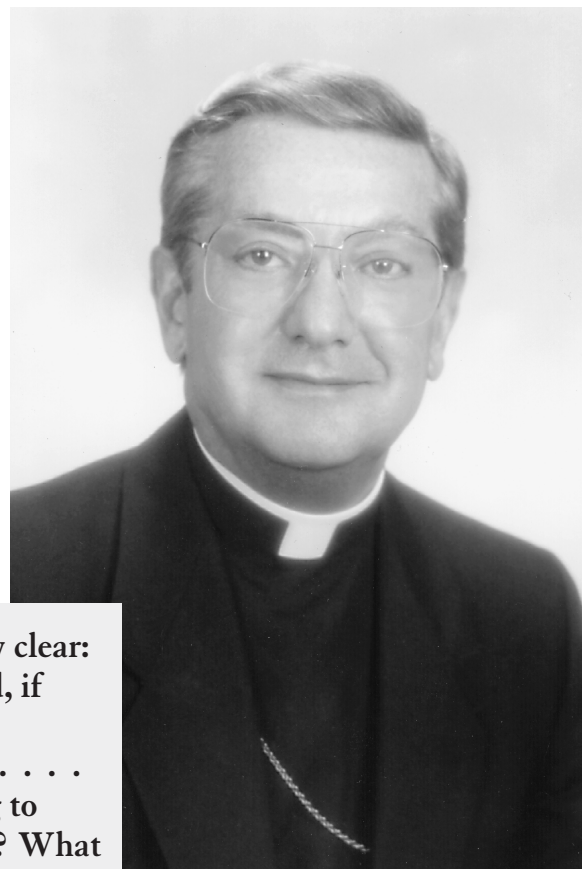
**Fidelio:** In the same issue of *Fidelio*, in which this interview will appear, we examine the question of “time reversal.” In re-reading the Pope’s Apostolic Letter, “Toward the Third Millennium,” I became aware that John Paul situated the Jubilee in this context, of the future acting on the present. 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 the-



**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?**

ological 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.

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

**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.**

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.



**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

**In the U.S., when you talk about choice, about individualism, this is a high value. In the current climate, use the words ‘family values,’ and it makes it all acceptable. Are these really family values, or something we would normally reject, couched in a way to make it more acceptable? It’s packaging, it’s the modern media, it’s spin control.**

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

“family values.” He is a protégé of Milton Friedman at the Chicago School of Economics. He believes in the legalization of drugs for the “free market.” He was in Argentina recently, talking about privatizing pensions, social security, and infrastructure: the Conservative Revolution agenda. How can he say he’s for family values with that agenda?

**Bishop Pilla:** Because that’s what makes it work. “Buzz words” is right! Words turned inside out. That’s why people who support abortion say they’re “pro-choice.” They couch it in those terms to make it more acceptable, and people fall for rhetoric. In the U.S., when you talk about choice, this is a high value. Talk about individualism—high value. See? And now, in the current climate, use the words “family values,” and it makes it all acceptable.

You have to listen to what is being said. Are these really family values, or something we would normally reject, couched in a way to make it more acceptable? It’s packaging, it’s the modern media, it’s spin control. It’s clever, but you’ve got to be careful. Then, they won’t get away with it.

**Fidelio:** Could he use the institutions of the Catholic Church to become an American spokesman for these things?

**Bishop Pilla:** The Bishops Conference speaks for the Bishops; nobody else.

**Fidelio:** The title of the 1996 National Lay Forum is, “Crossing the Threshold with Hope.”

**Bishop Pilla:** And these are real issues that you bring up. They are complex, and, in the course of one interview, we certainly can’t resolve all these things. I keep going back to who we are: I am at peace and I have confidence, not because I have all the answers, but because I trust in a good and loving God, made so clear to me in the life of Jesus Christ; and He said, that victory is assured for those who believe and persevere, and I take that at its word. So, for me, the suffering isn’t meaningless—it isn’t just pain, it’s redemptive. Somehow my continued efforts, despite failure, despite pain, are adding to that whole salvific effort—just as His was.

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

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, services 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.*

*This interview was conducted for Fidelio by Nina Ogden on Oct. 12, in Cleveland, Ohio at the National Lay Forum sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.*

**Fidelio:** Bishop Hubbard, you addressed an executive session of the U.S. Bishops Conference last fall, to raise your concerns about the organization called the Catholic Alliance, which was started by the Christian Coalition. Why did you raise this issue?

**Bishop Hubbard:** I received literature from them right following our Holy Father left the U.S. after his trip here last October. I found much of this literature extremely disturbing, especially the partisan tone and the blatant untruths of the Alliance’s Congressional

**The ‘Catholic Alliance’ stated its purpose as representing the Catholic community before the Congress, state legislatures, and local political bodies, and I thought that would sow great confusion. I was also concerned about the Catholic faithful, who would think that this material could represent the social doctrine of the Church.**

scorecard. I was also disturbed by the intentional manipulation in the literature, which implied that the Alliance spoke for the Holy Father and was officially “Catholic.” The organization stated its purpose as representing the Catholic community before the Congress, state legislatures, and local political bodies, and I thought that would sow great confusion among those bodies. I was also concerned about the confusion created among the Catholic faithful, who would somehow think that this material could represent the social doctrine of the Church. The Bishops Conference had published a very carefully thought out statement on political responsibility (“Political Responsibility, Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good”). Our statement cuts across political and ideological lines. Its strongest characteristic is its consistent advocacy for the dignity and sacredness of all human life, at every stage of human life. The material I received was absolutely at variance with that statement.