

Vatican by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

Ratzinger on the human mind

Progress in treating mental illness must begin by defining how man differs from all other living creatures.

From Nov. 14 to 16, scientists, researchers, and scholars from 90 countries participated at the Vatican in the Fifth International Conference of the Pontifical Pastoral Council for Health Care Workers.

The theme of the meeting was "The Human Mind," as the synthesis of the human and the divine. As it was defined by Msgr. Fiorenzo Angelini, the chairman of the Pontifical Council, it is "the expression of what distinguishes man from every other living being." The meeting, Monsignor Angelini went on, "seeks to be a choir composed of multiple voices coming from all over the world; it will depart from the theological outlook to then touch on the scientific aspects of the problem and finally to approach the juridical regulation and organization of aid and prevention on the world level."

"From the profound significance that intelligence has for man," Monsignor Angelini went on, "descends the need for a commitment at the ethical-moral and scientific level to safeguard the human mind." This is a fundamental commitment and, to say the least, very ambitious. Just in Italy alone the overall cost of neurological and psychiatric diseases surpasses 18 trillion liras, and in the United States it amounts to some \$300 million. According to 1989 estimates, the number of cases of dementia in Italy hovers around 741,000, and cerebro-vascular diseases strike 564,300 victims.

Studies of the brain will allow us to treat not only neurological, psychi-

atric, psychological, and cognitive disorders, but also fertility and infertility, infectious, parasitical, and cardiovascular diseases, AIDS, auto-immune diseases, and drug dependencies.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opened the sessions of this important conference with a report on the "mystery which is man" in the light of Biblical revelation.

"The fragmentation and particularization of knowledge of man about himself," said the cardinal, "does not prevent us from grasping the unity of the subject under consideration. This is achieved when we consider the definitive significance and the original truth of our existence, which consists of the indivisible unity of the creature-man in his twofold dimension as immanent, i.e., his solid belonging to the created world, and transcendent, which leads him, as a constant tension of searching and longing, to draw nigh to God."

"The anthropological question," Cardinal Ratzinger declared, "must be situated in relation to the original truth of the mystery of human existence. The Holy Scripture always indicates the totality, the unity of the human being. And in Christ there appears the original design. It is confirmed, in an unexpected way, that man, this finite being, is *capax infiniti*, capable of reaching truth, capable of reaching God." This infinite richness of the reality of man demonstrates, the cardinal went on, "the distance and

the opposition between the Christian conception and reductions of the rationalistic-Cartesian or monist-materialist sort, which simplify the question of man by reducing him to a mere material reality, denying his opening to the transcendental, or introducing a dualism between spirit and matter in terms of a split or a contrast."

After Cardinal Ratzinger's masterful presentation, Prof. Gerald Edelman, a Nobel Prize winner in medicine, inaugurated the long series of scientific speeches which, despite some praiseworthy exceptions, showed the epistemological weakness present today in the field of scientific research on such a fundamental subject. In this context, if the contribution offered by the theologians in their interventions is welcomed and deepened, a new impulse will be given to the studies and experiments which are ongoing in this sector.

The Carmelite priest Bonifacio Honings, moral theology professor at the Pontifical Lateran University, invited conference participants to reflect on the primacy of man over all other forms of life in the universe.

"The human person, precisely by virtue of his intellectual nature, can attain the highest degree of his dignity as a person," said Father Honings. "With his intelligence he participates in the light of the mind of God," and with his conscience, "the most secret nucleus, the inner sanctum of man in which every man finds himself alone before God," he can formulate a moral judgment with regard to his own actions and non-actions.

The conference proceedings were concluded by Pope John Paul II, who made a heartfelt appeal to public authorities, scientists, researchers, and sociologists to commit themselves to a better knowledge of the vastness and complexities of the problems of the mentally ill.