Theological commission publishes document on natural law

BY CINDY WOODEN

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Modern men and women may deny the existence of “natural law,” but they actually recognize that certain moral values, such as protecting the environment, are universally valid, said members of the International Theological Commission.

The commission members, appointed by the pope and working in an advisory role with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, looked at the traditional Catholic teaching on natural law and modern efforts to identify ethical values common to all people in their document, “In Search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law.”

The Vatican published the document in Italian and French in early June.

Questions about what is good and what is bad and whether or not all people can agree on the conclusions “are more urgent than ever given the degree to which people have become aware that they form one global community,” the document went said.

The great challenges facing the world — such as protecting the environment, fighting terrorisms, promoting solidarity with the poor and regulating biotechnology — are international concerns with international repercussions, commission members said.

For centuries, the Catholic Church has insisted that there is such a thing as “natural law,” a code of ethics written by God in the consciences of each human being and that each one that person can discover through the use of their reason.

But an increased emphasis on personal freedom and concern that ethics may be culturally or religiously specific have tended to undercut the notion that natural law is, in fact, natural and accessible to all, the theologians said.

In addition, they said the promotion of common ethical values and moral values has been hurt by people who have presented natural law as a detailed list of do’s and don’ts rather than as a set of guiding principles for protecting the dignity of the human person and promoting the common good.

Another problem caused by people who believe they are promoting natural law is a tendency to insist that it is God’s law, while ignoring considerations about what is good for human beings and most respectful of their freedom, the theologians said.

Since God created human beings, his will concerning their behavior must make sense from the point of view of what is best for them and it must be something people can figure out when they reflect with intelligence and respect for one another, they said.

“The vision of the world in which the doctrine of natural law was developed and still finds its meaning implies a reasoned conviction that there exists a harmony in what God wills, what human beings want and need and what nature demands, the document said.

Rejection of natural law in favor of a reliance on legislated laws promoted and approved by the majority can be deceiving because it “opens the way to the arbitrariness of power, the dictatorship of the numerical majority and to ideological manipulation to the detriment of the common good,” the document said.

In the document, members of the theological commission briefly reviewed the moral teaching of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, traditional African religions, Islam and the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome to demonstrate that natural law is not a Catholic invention valid only for Catholics. And it asked leaders of those religions and philosophers to join in an international discussion about ethical values that can be recognized as universally valid and necessary.

The review highlighted the fact that “some types of human behavior are recognized by most cultures as expressions of a certain reverence for protecting the life of other persons and lives and realizes his humanity: acts of courage, patience in the trials and difficulties of life, cooperation for the weak, moderation in the use of material goods, a responsible attitude toward the environment (and) compassion to the common good,” it said.

“On the other hand, some behaviors are universally recognized as objects of censure: killing, theft, lying, rape, covetousness and greed,” they said.

The values are not rights of the person, they are attitudes most respectful of human dignity; and the faults are not simply sins, but acts that threaten human life, human dignity and peaceful coexistence, they said.

They also said that marriage between a man and a woman united for life and open to having children is an example of a moral value that is not simply religiously motivated, but coincides with the fact that human beings are either male or female and have a natural urge to procreate.

While saying that all sins are “against nature” in the sense that they are obstacles to a right relationship with God and/or with others, the document said, “some behaviors are judged as ‘sins against nature’ because they directly contradict human nature.

As examples, the document referred to suicide, which “goes against the natural inclination to preserve one’s life and make it productive,” as well as what it described as “some sexual practices that go directly against the purpose” of being created male or female.

...