



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Fall 1988 | Vol. XIV, No. 3

EDITORIAL: STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IN THE CITY OF THE ANGELS (CONCLUSION)

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IN THE LAST TWO ISSUES OF *FAITH & REASON* WE HAVE BEEN EXAMINING THE structured dialogue which took place between the Pope and the American Catholic Bishops in Los Angeles. We conclude our reflections in this issue with an examination of the exchange which took place between the Holy Father and the Archbishop of Milwaukee, Rembert Weakland. This dialogue dealt with “the role of the laity in society and the Church in the United States.”

The Archbishop began in a very upbeat way with statistics indicating the alleged growth and strength of the Catholic laity. According to Weakland's statistics, the Catholic laity make up 28% of the total population which is an increase of 8% since 1947. The Archbishop informed the Pope that the laity are “moving rapidly into the upper echelons of society, business and politics.” This is a source of great pride to the Archbishop since these people are “products of the fine Catholic educational tradition of the Church in the USA.”

These upwardly mobile Catholics continue to seek higher levels of education. Accordingly, it “can be assumed” that the laity will “continue to take a prominent role” in American society. The Archbishop sees this as a great improvement over the dark period before the Second World War when the Catholic laity were “mostly working class immigrants, considering themselves second class citizens at best.” Today, the Church in America “can boast of having the largest number of educated faithful in the world.”

The jubilant Archbishop again turns to sociological statistics to demonstrate the vigor of the Catholic laity. He mentions that Sunday Mass attendance has declined from 74% in 1958 to 53% in 1985 but quickly added that 71% went to Mass at least once a month! This fact is not perceived as a serious pastoral problem by the Archbishop since the figure “has been stable” for the past decade and the defection rate today “is not much different” from the 1950's.

Weakland continues with this insightful statistical analysis: An increased number of Catholic laity are reading the Bible and attend “other Church functions.” Another cause for the Archbishop's optimism is that surveys “show a remarkable increase” in the numbers attending the sacrament of Reconciliation, up from 18% in 1977 to 23% in 1986. The Archbishop then informed the Pope that there is a “high rate of contentment with the changes of Vatican II especially among intellectuals.” All of these advances present the hierarchy with new challenges.

The Archbishop then lists 5 areas of concern: First of all, because of the advances in education, “the faithful” seek to examine the “intrinsic worth of an argument” rather than accepting it “on the basis of the authority itself.” Since a great deal of this teaching touches the professional competency of the laity, there must be greater collaboration and consultation. The Archbishop expresses a special concern for Catholic intellectuals who are “more sensitive to the credibility of the Church” if their peers should perceive a loss of this competency on the part of the teaching Church.

The second area deals with political questions where Catholics are “jealous” of their freedom and “deeply resent being told how to vote on an issue or for which candidate to vote.” The Archbishop warns that such “interference” could backfire and have “the opposite effect on them.” (A strange comment for the Archbishop since we have “the largest number of educated faithful in the world.”) Any “authoritarian” incursion into the political process is “counterproductive” and will simply be ignored.

The third area of concern is the faithful’s demand for additional assistance from the Church on how to bring the Gospel to their place of work. The fourth area deals with the laity’s desire to offer their knowledge and skill to help the Church. The faithful “feel,” according to the Archbishop, that they are prevented from making their contribution “by a fear (on the part of clerics) that can look like clericalism or clerical control on the part of Church leadership.”

The fifth and final area presented by Weakland is the one which he develops most thoroughly: women’s desire to be “equal partners in sharing the mission of the Church.” The anguish expressed by the Archbishop deserves to be presented in its fullness:

There are no words to explain so much pain on the part of so many competent women today who feel they are second-class citizens in a Church they love. That pain turns easily to anger and is often shared and transmitted to the younger generation of men and women. Women do not want to be treated as stereotypes of sexual inferiority, but want to be seen as necessary to the full life of a Church that teaches and shows by example the co-discipleship of the sexes as instruments of God’s Kingdom. They seek a Church where the gifts of women are equally accepted and appreciated. Many of them do not yet see the Church imaging such a co-discipleship, but fear that it is still one of male superiority and dominance.

Lest this be misunderstood, Weakland assures the Pope that Catholic women “repudiate those forms of feminism that undermine the importance of the family or that go contrary to their nature.” He warns however that:

.. many do not see the Church as yet striving for a structure where women are considered as equal partners, where the feminine is no longer subordi-

nate but seen in a holistic mutuality with the masculine as forming the full image of the Divine.

To give a fuller picture to the Pope of the pastoral situation in the U.S., the Archbishop mentions as positive factors the charismatic renewal movement, the discovery of the Bible, Catholic Workers and Renew. On the negative side, he mentions the large number of divorces, the breakup of families, the influence of affluence on social values and “the possible evils of consumerism and waste.”

The Archbishop concludes by calling attention to the two great pastoral challenges confronting American Catholics: 1) racism; and 2) social concern for the poor.

The Holy Father, in his response, acknowledged the Archbishop’s pride concerning the fact that the United States has “the largest number of educated faithful in the world.” He then commented that this fact “has many implications.”

John Paul II turns initially to the state of American culture. Since there are so many educated faithful, they should be making a great impact upon American culture as it is chiefly through the laity that the Church exercises her influence upon culture. Here the Pope asks a number of probing questions:

But *how is the American culture evolving today?* Is this evolution being influenced by the Gospel? Does it clearly reflect Christian inspiration? Your music, your poetry and art, your drama, your painting and sculpture, the literature that you are producing - are all those things which reflect the soul of a nation being influenced by the spirit of Christ for the perfection of humanity?

Behind these probing questions lies an inquiry into the effectiveness of Catholic education in this country since we do have, as the Pope here ironically quotes again, “the largest number of educated faithful in the world.” The laity themselves must first be inspired by the Gospel before they can “bring the Gospel’s uplifting and purifying influence to the world of culture.”

In the areas of economics, politics, mass media, etc., the Pope reminds the bishops that their service to the laity is “primarily *a priestly service*.” As shepherds, they are to preach and teach the Word of God “with fidelity to the truth,” leading the laity more deeply into the mys-

tery of salvation. The bishops, in fulfilling this pastoral charge, are to lead the laity to holiness “especially through the grace of the Eucharist and the whole sacramental life.” The leadership exercised by the hierarchy should be purified by prayer and penance and therefore should not bear in any way an “authoritarian style.” The bishop should however “listen and encourage, challenge and at times correct.”

A certain acknowledgement of the failure of the Catholic educational enterprise, in terms of handing on the Faith, can be seen in the Pope’s call for “*a comprehensive and solid programme of catechesis.*” The purpose of this catechesis is:

... maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the area of family life, the Pope acknowledged Weakland’s reference to “the large number of divorces and the breakup of so many families” as a source of “great sadness” and “deep pastoral concern.” An integral part of the Church’s pastoral care for families is presenting the Church’s full teaching on marriage. The bishops should oppose those trends which would threaten the stability of marriage, the dignity of human love and human life, including “its transmission.” In this area, the bishops must never lose confidence and courage. The very charism of the apostolic office should help them “to present as effectively as possible the whole teaching of the Church, including the prophetic message contained in *Humanae Vitae* and in *Familiaris Consortio.*”

The Church’s clear teaching concerning the intrinsic relationship between the unitive and procreative aspects of the marriage act are to be presented along with efforts to make known natural methods of regulating fertility. The Pope speaks of this as a special responsibility of the bishop:

As bishops we have the charism and the pastoral responsibility to make our people aware of *the unique influence that the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage has on every aspect of married life, including sexuality.*

To do this effectively requires not just an occasional sermon but “the abiding pastoral interest and support of each bishop” in what the Pope calls a “most important

apostolate.”

The Pope next expresses his gratitude for the bishops’ efforts in the areas of peace, justice, support for the missions and the defense of human life. In the latter area, the Pope poignantly gave a clear primacy to an issue which Weakland failed to even mention.

Among your many activities at the service of life there is one which, especially at this juncture of history, deserves our strongest commendation and our firmest support: it is the continuing struggle against what the Second Vatican Council calls the “abominable crime” of abortion (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51). Disregard for the sacred character of life in the womb weakens the very fabric of civilization; it prepares a mentality, and even a public attitude, that can lead to the acceptance of other practices that are against the fundamental rights of the individual. This mentality can, for example, completely undermine concern for those in want, manifesting itself in insensitivity to social needs; it can produce contempt for the elderly, to the point of advocating euthanasia; it can prepare the way for those forms of genetic engineering that go against life, the dangers of which are not yet fully known to the general public.



The Pope concludes his comments by proclaiming the dignity of women which “must be affirmed in its ontological character” before there is a consideration of “the special and exalted roles fulfilled by women as wives, mothers or consecrated women.”

CONCLUSION

These dialogues have provided an excellent framework for an examination of the very real problems and tensions which exist between Rome and the American hierarchy. We have seen a marked difference in language, style, emphasis and perception. The following contrast will illustrate this:

THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY SPEAKS OF | THE POPE SPEAKS OF

freedom.....	submission to truth
growth.....	disobedience
openness.....	fidelity
pluralism.....	American parochial world view
Rahner & Murray.....	St. Paul & the Gospels
sociological statistics.....	the truth
optimism.....	realism
horizontalism.....	the forgotten vertical dimension
sociological structure.....	theological vision
struggle in moral understanding.....	lucidity of Church
difficulty.....	courage
challenges.....	grace
anguish.....	faith

It would appear that in the American bishop's openness to the American world view, the Pope perceives, and I would have to concur, a certain dilution of faith. This has led many of the bishops, possibly without being aware of it, into thinking too much like Americans and too little as bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. Our contemporary American culture is a powerful one and all Catholic Americans who live in it will, to a greater or lesser degree, be affected by it. It would not be proper to condemn the American cultural experience outright but there are many trends which are fundamentally opposed to the message of Christ and the Gospel and destructive of Catholic unity. This is why Pope John Paul II called our bishops, in every instance, away from statistics and the glory of the American experience back to Christ. One cannot help but get the sense that the Pope perceives a

certain crisis of faith and identity in the American hierarchy. In calling bishops back to having "that mind which was in Christ Jesus" he is showing the way for all Catholics in the United States to defend the universal primacy of Christ. Our response should be one of humble gratitude to our Lord for not leaving us orphans and to his Vicar for fulfilling his divine commission "*confirma fratres tuos*" (Lk 22:32).

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Sept. 29, 1988
 Feast of Sts. Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel

