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EDITORIAL: STRUCTURED DIALOGUE IN THE CITY OF THE ANGELS (PART II)

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IN OUR LAST ISSUE WE BEGAN OUR EXAMINATION OF THE DIALOGUE WHICH took place between representatives of the American bishops and the Holy Father in Los Angeles during his second pastoral visit to the United States. We concentrated upon the exchange between Cardinal Bernardin and the Pope on the key conciliar term “communio.” Here we would like to examine the dialogue between Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco and John Paul II concerning the Church’s moral teaching.

Despite the promise of Christ to send the Holy Spirit to remain with His Church and to guide it, the Archbishop stated that moral theology is “an example of human wisdom struggling to understand God’s revelation about how we live.” This “struggle” which the Archbishop emphasized throughout his talk is inevitable for a number of reasons. Quinn offers three for consideration. The first is that man as a creature is intellectually limited and must “struggle” with “a word the infinite God has spoken.” Secondly, man is “affected by the reality of sin.” After this abbreviatory presentation of the first two points, he offers his third and final point which contained the central theme of his presentation: modern man is “profoundly affected by rapid and pervasive change.”

To develop this idea, Archbishop Quinn turns to “the distinguished American theologian” John Courtney Murray for an opaque quotation which tends to muddle the traditional understanding of what is meant by “human nature.” In this quotation Murray states that in some ways this nature can change yet stay the same.

Quinn’s basic point is that there are “new human needs and desires” which raise fundamental challenges for moral theology. The Church must adopt a critical posture towards these new developments, judging them by the light of faith in order to defend the supernatural dignity of the human person. The Archbishop then quotes Vatican II’s *Optatam Totius* which called for the renewal of moral theology through a “livelier contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation.” (This point will be picked up and developed by the Pope in his response.)

What precisely are the “new realities” which the Church faces in the United States? Quinn lists the following eight in an obviously hierarchical order:

1. The United States’ emergence as a major military power;
2. Divorce and family instability which shakes the foundations of “civilization and religion;”
3. The “immensely high standard of living” found in America with its responsibilities and problems;
4. New medical technologies which aid in the generation and prolongation of human life along with “the shocking paradox” of killing human life through widespread abortion;
5. The “constantly developing insights” of the sciences of psychology and sociology into human sexuality and

emotions;

6. The “sexual revolution” which has led to widespread permissiveness in which “sexual activity” is freed from moral responsibility;

7. The “dramatically altered and changing social status of women with its concomitant impact on personal meaning and social identity;”

8. The “increased, widespread high level of education among American Catholics” which has changed their “understanding and expectations” concerning their role in the Church.

After listing these “critical new realities” which allegedly affect *moral* theology, the Archbishop fretfully speaks of the “tremendous difficulties” of bringing the “moral tradition” of the Church to bear on these rapidly changing problems. He states that the bishops accept the moral imperatives of the Gospel but immediately adds that they cannot fulfill their pastoral charge by “an uncritical application of solutions designed in past ages for problems which have qualitatively changed or which did not exist in the past” (i.e., paganism, hedonism, concupiscence?). As examples of the “Church’s dialogue with the new human realities,” he cites a number of documents issued by the Holy See and the American bishops.¹ These documents are together characterized by the Archbishop as “examples of the Church’s wisdom *struggling* with God’s revelation.” (emphasis added)

This leads the Archbishop to offer four moral and pastoral reflections. The first is a defense of the moral pedagogy used by the American bishops in their recent pastoral letters. It is a pedagogy which distinguishes between “universally binding moral principles found in the teaching of the Church” and “specific applications, observations and recommendations which allow for diversity of opinion on the part of those who assess the factual data of situations differently.” This distinction between “principle” and “prescription” does not mean that there cannot be “binding prescriptions” in the Church. To defend this position, Quinn offers a quotation (as did Cardinal Bernardin) from Karl Rahner.²

The second reflection speaks of the great concern of the American bishops who have found that the Church’s teaching in both sexual and social morality are frequently subjected to “negative criticism” at times “even by Catholics of good will.” Due to the “permissive, narcissistic and consumer qualities” of American society, people’s ability to listen to the Church’s teaching

have been severely weakened. The bishops must therefore seek new ways of communicating the teaching of the Church in a more attractive way in order to reach modern man.

For his third reflection, Quinn states his firm belief that “an authoritative teaching office has been entrusted to us (the bishops) in our communion with you as Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter.” Quinn states that in carrying out this sacred ministry, the bishops “have experienced the value of dialogue” as a most effective means of coming to understand more deeply “the nature of the moral questions posed by our times” and has assisted them to “formulate various responses.” The Archbishop then adds that dialogue and discussion “of course” should never be taken as substitutes for “the decisions of the Magisterium.” Lastly, he urges the Church’s magisterium to encourage moral theologians in their difficult task.

The Archbishop then concludes his address by recalling the central mystery of the cross of Christ which must remain the hermeneutic in moral theology otherwise it may degenerate into a discipline “which tells me what God has no right to expect of me.”

Let us now examine the Papal response. The Pope, just as we saw in his response to Cardinal Bernardin, immediately focuses his attention upon Christ. The Church as a community desires “to remain faithful *to the moral teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The *proclamation* of “a body of moral teaching” is absolutely essential to the Church’s mission to the world. The Holy Father emphasizes not the “struggle” of moral theology but the timeless wisdom of the Church which from her beginning “under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” has applied God’s saving truth to “all the many aspects of our living in this world.” the Pope re-directs the focal point of the discussion by quoting not from Karl Rahner but from St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians. He recalls the simple yet profound truth that the principle goal of the Christian’s moral life is “to lead a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way.” (Col. 1:10)

The Holy Father then zeros in upon what he considers to be the real problems for the American bishops in the exercise of their pastoral office: 1) the rejection by Catholics of clear Church teaching in the area of sexual and conjugal morality; 2) a false belief that Catholics can be selective in what they will and will not accept; 3) that

one is free to dissent from the teaching of the Magisterium and still remain a faithful Catholic. The Pope sternly tells the bishops that the rejection of Church teaching “is a grave error that challenges the teaching office of the bishops in the United States and elsewhere.” (emphasis added)

In responding to Archbishop Quinn’s anxiety over how to make the Church’s teaching more attractive to the present age, the Pope urges the bishops to deepen their faith in the power of God’s word which is the supreme truth. As St. Paul exhorted Timothy, so the Pope exhorts the bishops to preach the Word of God in season and out of season. Again we see John Paul II calling the bishops back to a theological vision: the truth of the Gospel. Unless they rivet their eyes upon Christ and the power of His truth and grace, they will sink like Peter into the secular sea when they take note of the wind and the waves (Lk. 14:22-33).

That the truth of Christ will bring “negative criticism” should not be surprising. The Pope states that there is nothing new or startling in this (or indeed for anyone who knows the history of the Church!). He states:

We must also constantly recall that the teaching of Christ’s Church - like Christ himself - is a “sign of contradiction.”

It has never been easy to accept the Gospel teaching in its entirety, and it never will be. The Church is committed, both in faith and morals, to make her teaching as clear and understandable as possible, presenting it in all the attractiveness of divine truth. And yet *the challenge of the Gospel remains inherent in the Christian message* transmitted to each generation.

The Holy Father next turns his attention to the conclusion of Archbishop Quinn’s talk and re-emphasizes that part in which he spoke of the Cross of Christ as God’s folly which is wiser than human wisdom.

“... the revelation of God par excellence is found in the Cross of Christ which makes God’s folly wiser than human wisdom. Often human wisdom in a given age appears to have the last word. But the Cross brings a perspective that changes judgments radically. Yes, dear brothers, *the Cross - in the very act of revealing mercy, compassion and love - changes judgements radically.*”

Having laid the theological ground work of the centrality of Christ and his Cross, the Pope then proceeds to make a number of general points in response to Archbishop Quinn and the bishops on whose behalf he spoke. First he reminds the American episcopate that the Church is a “community of faith.” He then defines, as any good theologian should, what is meant by the terms used. To accept *faith* “is to give assent to the word of God as transmitted by the Church’s authentic *Magisterium*.” This assent is “the basic attitude” of the believer which, as St. Thomas stated, is an act involving both the will and the intellect. The Pope again warns that it is wrong to try to “model this act of religion” upon opinions drawn from secular culture. All theological discussion in the Church must take place “*within the framework of faith.*” The Holy Father objects to those who would legitimize dissent or more disturbingly make dissident teaching the basis for the Church’s teaching effort.

Dissent from Church doctrine remains what it is, dissent; as such it may not be proposed or received on an equal footing with the Church’s authentic teaching. Moreover, as bishops we must be especially responsive to our role as authentic teachers of the faith when opinions at variance with the Church’s teaching are proposed as a basis for pastoral practice.



The Pope supports the bishops in their efforts to dialogue with theologians concerning their *legitimate* freedom of inquiry. He commends the bishops for encouraging them in their “difficult task” and assures them that the Church “needs and deeply appreciates their *dedicated* and *constructive* work.” (emphasis added) The “Catholic theologian” on his part must realize that his is “a vocation and a responsibility” which must serve the community of faith and therefore is “subject to the pastors of the Church.” In their dialogue with theologians, the Pope bluntly tells the bishops that they must “show the unacceptability of dissent and confrontation as a policy and method in the area of Church teaching.”

The Holy Father then recalls the words of the Archbishop who spoke of the serious challenge posed to their teaching ministry. It is a challenge which calls for a

true *metanoia* of mind and heart back to the Faith. John Paul reminds the bishops that the path to men's hearts "very often passes through the mind." A point rather basic yet unfortunately he thought necessary to state. Today more than ever there is a need for an "evangelization and catechesis of the mind." In an age of excessive sentimentality with its touchy-feely approach to religion, the Pope here is obviously calling for a return to sound doctrine. Faith involves the acceptance of basic and profound truths which are the birthright of every Catholic.

Here I wish to underline the importance of the formation of the mind at every level of Catholic life. Catholic children and young people need to be given *an effective opportunity to learn the truths of the faith*, in such a way that they become capable of formulating their Catholic identity in terms of doctrine and thought.

How often do our Catholic people cry out for bread but receive a stone or perhaps at times a scorpion! The Pope reminds the Catholic press (under the control of the bishops) of their obligation to educate and elevate the level of Catholic thought and culture in this country. Seminaries, as well, have a great responsibility to insure that young men preparing to be Christ's priests will "acquire a high level of intellectual preparation and competence." Programs of ongoing education for priests, religious and laity should provide a "serious intellectual approach" to the many problems confronting society.

He then turns his attention to the relationship between the bishop and the Catholic university. In an obvious reference to the Curran affair, he states in no uncertain terms that the bishops must directly involve themselves in the lives of these institutions especially concerning their Catholicity and to insure a proper doctrinal formation for students.

A crucial aspect of this "apostolate of the mind" concerns the *duty and right of bishops to be present in an effective way in Catholic colleges and universities and institutes of higher studies in order to safeguard and promote their Catholic character*, especially in what affects the transmission of Catholic doctrine. It is a task which requires personal attention on the part of bishops, since it is a specific responsibility stemming from their teaching office. It implies frequent contacts with teaching and administrative personnel, and calls for providing serious programmes of pastoral care for students and others within the academic community.

The papal response to Archbishop Quinn emphasizes that the Church's moral doctrine is quite clear and should be communicated in its entirety. Rather than emphasizing and morosely dwelling upon the difficulties involved in transmitting that lucid teaching, the Pontiff reminds the bishops that the teaching of the Church's Magisterium is the authentic vox Christi and therefore it has the power and grace of His truth to attract men's minds and hearts. He ends by again exhorting the bishops to serve their flocks by teaching sound doctrine and acknowledging the primacy of Christ and His grace (not "the constantly developing insights of the psychological and sociological sciences").

One of the greatest services we bishops can render to the Church is to consolidate present and future generations of Catholics in a sound and complete understanding of their faith. The ecclesial community will thus be wonderfully strengthened for all aspects of Christian moral living and for generous service. The intellectual approach that is needed, however, is one intimately linked to faith and prayer. *Our people must be aware of their dependence on Christ's grace* and of the great need to open themselves ever more to its action. Jesus himself wants us all to be convinced of his words: '*Apart from me you can do nothing*' (Jn. 15:5).

Petrus parlavit!

(To be concluded next issue.)

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Feast of Corpus Christi