

Franciscan Responds to Father Greeley

By ROY GASNICK, OFM

As chairman of the American Commission on Franciscan Documents, I was chiefly responsible for the English language edition of the circular letter of Father Constantine Koser, OFM, about which Father Greeley writes (Courier-Journal, 1/30/74). I know the document well. Father Greeley, apparently, does not. The quotations are not from the official text of the circular letter. Father Greeley seems to rely on a secondary source, especially for the one

serious misquote which, interestingly enough, also appeared in the New York Times.

In the first place, the letter was not "secret." It was distributed to each of the some 24,000 Franciscans throughout the world, with the English edition published here early in January. Neither was the letter personal, imposing Father Koser's will on the Friars Minor; its title, which Father Greeley should not have missed, is: "Discussion Points for the 1974 Session of the Plenary Council of the Order of Friars

Minor." Father Koser emphasized this in the very first paragraph: "For this reason I propose the following points for discussion, and insist they are points for discussion — nothing more."

Second, there is a misquote, unpardonable for a research scholar of the rank of Father Greeley. He, as well as the New York Times, cites Father Koser as saying that the Franciscan had given up his "rights to another person, namely the superior." The official text says that the friar "gives up a good part of his rights as a person and as a Christian to another person — to the superior who is his [the friar's] servant in the Lord." The first omission is serious enough, but in the second, Father Greeley robs the superior in the Franciscan Order of his most important characteristic — that of servanthood, a notion that Father Koser himself has fought to restore in the renewal of the Franciscan ideal of "fraternal government."

Third, the rights Father Greeley mentions that Franciscans are supposed to have given up are completely out of context since he does not mention the radically renewed principles Father Koser lists which define and severely limit the use of authority by superiors.

For example, Father Koser said that authority does not confer the license to impose one's will; that

authority demands dialogue with the friar and his community for any decisions about himself; that arbitrariness is radically and completely excluded from authority; that authority does not include the use of power and force; that superiors have the duty of recognizing the gifts and the charisma of the friar; that the friar's fulfillment as a person is a duty of the superior; and that each friar has fundamental and equal rights.

Furthermore, the key paragraph in Father Koser's letter was this: "Viewing obedience so radically, and giving it such exceptional importance in his plan for living, St. Francis was surprisingly more concerned with authority and its exercise than with obedience. He saw clearly that in the face of such broad surrender of rights, authority and its exercise would become an extremely delicate and responsible assignment. Otherwise it would seriously compromise the dignity of the human person of the friar subject. Or, it would fatally degenerate into tyranny and oppression contrary to the Will of God, contrary to the Gospel."

The most damaging thing to a scholar of Father Greeley's repute, however, is his caricature of a person he obviously does not know. Father Koser is no "authoritarian dictator," but one of the most forceful, though low-keyed, powers in Rome working for the renewal of the Church. He called for the Extraordinary Chapter for the renewal of the Franciscan Order even before the close of Vatican II. He spearheaded the movement to decentralize authority in the Order. He steered the 1967 Chapter to provide full equality for Brothers, and has continued

to do battle with the Sacred Congregation for Religious to allow Brothers to become superiors. He has, through the 1967 Franciscan General Constitutions, promulgated a radically revised form of "fraternal government." He has not only permitted but has encouraged experimentation in all facets of Franciscan life, and apostolate, and has insisted upon the rights of each friar to grow and to be allowed the free development of his human personality. The Franciscans, obviously, need no liberation from Father Koser.

Father Greeley's column may come as a sad blow to those who, expecting accuracy from one of America's foremost social research scholars, have found instead another of those critics who write in haste without checking facts.

THE CHURCH 1974

I am reluctant to get into a dogfight with the Franciscans. I have close friends in the community, and my respect for the order is profound. Nonetheless, some of the attacks on my recent criticism of a letter of their General have been so vicious that I have no choice but to reply.

That tiny fraction of readers who remember what I have written after turning to the next page will recall that I strongly objected to Superior General Koser's claim that when people join the religious life they give up their human rights (including the development of talents and making decisions about health care) to the superior. To be fair to my critics let me duplicate a paragraph from a Franciscan communications official from New York, Father Roy M. Gasnick.

There is a misquotation unpardonable for a research scholar of the rank of Father Greeley. He, as well as the New York Times, cites Father Koser as saying that the Franciscan friar must give up his "rights to another person, namely the superior." The official text says that the friar "gives up a good part of his rights as a person and as a Christian to another person — to the superior who is his [the friar's] servant in the Lord." The first omission is serious enough, but in the second, Father Greeley robs the superior in the Franciscan Order of his most important characteristic — that of service.

At first blush the paragraph seems harmless enough, but when one stops to consider it, it becomes mind-boggling in its gross and self-righteous intellectual dishonesty.

What in the world is the difference between giving up a right and giving it up in "good part"? Think about it, gentle reader. What kind of a right is it that is given up in "good part"? Is it any right at all? What fraction of a right is it? Ninety per cent? Forty? Five? One? Are not human rights like being pregnant, you either are or you aren't, you either have a right or you don't? When "push comes to shove, the superior has the right and you don't. So Father Koser's precious qualification is a nonsense phrase that means nothing at all.

But your right is saved because your superior is your servant in the Lord. How many superiors, by the way, do you know who really act like servants? Does the role of superior in canon law make servanthood likely or even possible? Has there ever been an ecclesiastical tyrant in the history of the Church who has not modestly claimed to be nothing more than a servant? Of course, it is as your servant that he sends you to second-rate doctors and prevents you from developing your God-given talents.

What does this second qualifying phrase add to the meaning of the letter? Does the fact that your superior is your

servant give you all your human rights back? If it does, then why raise the point in the first place? And if it does not, and presumably it does not, then you don't have your rights. So the qualification is another nonsense phrase.

Remove the qualifying nonsense phrases and Father Koser says that when you enter religious rites you give up your human rights. That's what I said he said. And the two qualification phrases have nothing to do with the substance of his claim.

Let me propose a test to my Franciscan critics. Take all the young men who are about to enter your community next fall. Tell them bluntly that the superior will have the right to decide from that day forward whether and how sick they may be and whether and how their natural abilities will be developed. Then see if they are all that eager to flock to your seminaries (which as far as I can learn are first-rate places).

You won't tell them that, of course, because that's not the reality of your everyday life. Your superiors are far too shrewd to burden themselves with making other people's health decisions. And talent is in such short supply in the Church that they are perfectly delighted when talented people arrive on the scene. "Good heavens, yes, young man, develop your talent to the fullest."

I would argue that this position is right not merely in practice but in theory too. I cannot understand why some Franciscans are so eager to defend Father Koser's theory, which they wouldn't dream of following in practice, and so reluctant to draw a new theory from the wisdom of daily practice.

Talk about giving up human rights may have made sense in another era (although I'm not so sure about that), but it makes no sense at all in our own. It is wrong in practice and wrong in theory (which is what I said in my previous column). So that this fight with some Franciscans will not be totally negative, I shall turn to what I think is the theory and the rhetoric which ought to replace the obsolete and irrelevant "authority-obedience" line in future columns.

In the meantime, poor fool that I am, I thought that the essence of the Franciscan life was not obedience but poverty, and that the essence of Christianity was not giving up rights but loving generosity to others, generosity achieved not by becoming less human but more.

Nazareth College Names Official

The appointment of Nicholas Thines as Nazareth College director of placement and career planning has been announced by college president, Dr. Alice L. Foley.

Thines, a graduate of Union College in Schenectady, comes to Nazareth from Security Trust Co. where he has been the business development officer since March 1973. He joined Security Trust in 1969 after a tour of duty in the Coast Guard.

At Nazareth, Thines will assume responsibility for the expansion of the college's placement and career planning services, effective March 1. As an advisor, he will assist students and alumni in planning further academic work and securing professional positions. He will also coordinate employer-college relations by seeking out new opportunities in business and the professional areas, visiting employers and personnel officers, and bringing recruiters to campus.

U.S. Bishop Supports Solzhenitsyn

Washington, D.C. (RNS) — Alexander Solzhenitsyn, through the power of his conviction and moral character, has among other things "called the (Christian) Church to be more faithful to its prophetic mission in defense of the innocent," a leading Roman Catholic prelate declared here.

Bishop James S. Rausch, general secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference and top spokesman for the U.S. bishops, said the Russian writer's present position is a new challenge to the Church here and throughout the world to stand with him and others like him in defense of dignity and humanity of each person.



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