

Supporters and detractors pray for theologian, Church

By Richard A. Kiley and Teresa A. Parsons

Whether they agreed or disagreed with Father Charles Curran's positions on moral theology, people across the Diocese of Rochester prayed for the Catholic University of America professor Monday night, August 18.

Few on either side of the issue were surprised by the announcement released that day by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which termed the Rochester-born theologian "no longer suitable nor eligible" to teach Catholic theology.

Father Curran's local supporters expressed disappointment and distress at the decision.

Above all, his advocates were disturbed by the Congregation's rigid rejection of the theologian's proposed compromise. He repeatedly offered not to teach courses on sexual ethics if the Congregation continued to recognize him as a Catholic theologian.

"I regret that the Congregation feels it necessary to make this decision," said Monsignor William H. Shannon, an adviser to the Rochester-based support group known as Friends for Charles Curran. "I think theological dialogue would have been better served if the compromise had been accepted," said the monsignor, a noted scholar who has endorsed some of Father Curran's dissenting views.

He was critical of the secrecy with which the Congregation's decision was made. "If the differences between Father Curran and the Congregation were more open it would have led to better dialogue within the Church," he said.

"I deeply regret that the process did not fit the qualifications of what most people would consider due process," Monsignor Shannon said. He did not wish to make detailed comments until having had an opportunity to study the letter Father Curran received from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation. He did say, however, "I regret that this would happen in our Church."

Father William V. Spilly, pastor of the Cayuga Team Ministry, said the decision marked "a sad day for the Church," and that Father Curran is the first of several theologians who will be affected by the Congregation's investigations.

"Charlie is the first one; they're going to go after others," said Father Spilly, who recently headed a petition drive that gained 288 parishioners' signatures in support of Father Curran. Copies of the petition were sent to Father Curran, CUA Chancellor Archbishop James Hickey and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, among others.

"I think it (the decision) will retard research and retard people from using their God-given talents to help us in the faith," Father Spilly said.

He added that it was "sad that so many people go along with pure structure," and that "the whole issue of dissent was being squelched" around the morality — especially in matters of sexual morality.

"I talked to Charlie last week, and he told me things didn't look good," Father Spilly said. "He told me he probably will teach at a secular college. He loves the Church. I'm sorry about this whole situation."

P. David Finks, a member of the Friends for Charles Curran group, said that despite the Congregation's decision, Father Curran will be "vindicated in God's good time."

"Thank God that the Church is greater than the Vatican," said Finks, who is an old friend and former student of Father Curran. "His friends will continue to support him, but it is sad that — at a time when people of the world are so in need of compassion and community — Vatican authorities are caught up in power games and authority squabbles."

Finks was unsure of what the support group for Father Curran will do until the theologian announces his future intentions, but was certain Father Curran "will continue to seek due process, and we will support him."

Father James Lawlor, pastor of St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester, called the statement from Rome "unfortunate but not unexpected."

"Father Curran is a man who is both faithful to God and loyal to the Church as such, and we will continue to offer him our support and encouragement," said Father Lawlor, who had studied under Father Curran at Catholic University.

Sister Diane Branch, SSJ, also termed the verdict "unfortunate" and said the Church needs to rethink its theological stance.

"His (Father Curran's) reputation, integrity and scholarship have long been respected in theological circles. Perhaps (the decision) is a statement that needs to be responded to by the Church community," she said.

Saying that theologians had to respond to the "grass-roots community and the Church," Sister Diane added that "theology is not cast in stone, and I'm sure the living, active community will react to that."

Father Edwin B. Metzger, pastor of St. Francis DeSales Parish in Geneva, was disconcerted by the verdict against Father Curran, who has been his friend for many years.

"Of course I'm disappointed. I had hoped there would be enough room in the academia and the Church for someone of his ability in the field of religious research and scripture," Father Metzger said.

On the other hand, while their convictions were confirmed by the decision, few of those who have spoken out against Father Curran's views hailed the announcement as a victory.

"As they say in sports, the only thing worse than a poor loser is a poor winner," said Donald Ninestine of St. Francis DeSales in Geneva. "I don't see anything to crow about ... I would just hope that first of all Bishop (Matthew H.) Clark and second of all the priests of the diocese would accept the decision."

"I truly do believe in my heart that if the decision had gone the other way, I'd say the same thing," he added.

Speaking for an organization called Concerned Roman Catholics of the Diocese of Rochester, Joseph Murray said his group is confident in the judgment of the Holy See.

"We are sorry he (Father Curran) can't see

things in the light of Church teaching," Murray said. "Everybody I know prays for him and other theologians who are going in a wayward direction."

Reached for comment Monday evening, most of Father Curran's detractors agreed that the Congregation had had little choice in the matter. Father Curran's proposed compromise was untenable from the beginning, according to Father John Healy, O. Carm., of Rochester.

"In my judgment, Father Curran had to be dismissed. If not, Church officials would have elevated his claim to academic freedom and dissent over the Church's divine right to maintain its teaching identity," he said. "He was trying to limit authority and push it at the same time."

One reason Father Curran was singled out by the Congregation was his rapport with Catholic University of America students — seminarians in particular, Father Healy said. "I think they felt they had to get (Father) Curran because of his influence on future priests."

Father Healy was left wondering why Father Curran fought to remain at a pontifical university. "It seemed to be an issue of principle, that he was testing the waters and questioning the limits of how far Church authority can go ... But it's a contradiction for a guy to pose as a teacher at a pontifical university and then oppose Catholic teaching."

At stake in the decision was the good of the whole Church, according to Father L. James Callan, pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle Church. "I don't see that the Church has any alternative. The thing I'm fearful of is some kind of legal action and the scandal that would be misinterpreted by the public."

"Let's pray for both Father Curran and the Church," Father Callan added.

Some of Father Curran's supporters have argued that a decision against him would further fragment American Catholics.

"We pray we don't have a formal schism, but we certainly recognize that as a possibility," Murray said.

Ninestine, however, anticipates the opposite result. "I believe the magisterium is the cornerstone of the Church," he said. "What fragments the Church is people not following the decisions of Rome and going in their own directions ... not the Church exerting its teaching authority."

Louis G. Joy of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Rochester affirms that the Congregation's decision affirms the validity of traditional Catholic teaching. "I hope it gives a warning to other dissenting theologians to stop issuing statements defying Catholic theology — that it will no longer be tolerated in Catholic universities," he said.

Others said they believe the potential impact of the decision on the Church has been overestimated. "I think this is just hand wringing now," Father Healy said. "This is all nonsense that there will be a witch hunt or that the pope is out to get liberals ... Nothing happened when they took away (Swiss theologian) Father Hans Kung's mandate. Life went on."

"The principle of dissent is convenient when one side wants it, but no one wants to admit it for the opposition," he added. "There's not fair playing here."

Now that the final decision has been made, those who agree with the Congregation hope for acceptance and an end to the whole affair.

"I hope that the Catholic people will accept this decision in the light of the living truth handed down to us in the tradition of the Church," said Jeanne Sweeney of Rochester. "No parent likes to discipline a child or takes pleasure in that, but it is sometimes necessary," she said. "I am sure the Holy Father and the Sacred Congregation take no pleasure in this."

"With all the talk of healing in the Church, I hope he (Father Curran) would start the healing process by cooperating with the decision and encouraging everyone else to do the same," Ninestine said.

"I would hope this would be the end of it," he added. "There is nothing to be gained by more discord either way."

Curran case history

March 30, 1934	Charles E. Curran born to John Francis and Gertrude B. Curran in Rochester.
1955	Earns B.A. from St. Bernard's College and is sent to study in Rome.
July 13, 1958	Ordained a priest of the Diocese of Rochester at St. Alexis Church, Rome.
1961	Earns doctoral degrees in moral theology from Gregorian University and Accademia Alfonsiana.
1961-65	Teaches moral theology at St. Bernard's Seminary.
1965	Takes position in Catholic University of America's (CUA) moral theology department as assistant professor, "on loan" from Diocese of Rochester.
Sept. 23, 1966	National Catholic Reporter draws attention to Father Curran's views by publishing discussion on his lectures.
April 10, 1967	CUA trustees vote to allow Father Curran's contract to lapse.
April 17, 1967	Notified by CUA rector Archbishop William J. McDonald of the trustees' decision.
April 18, 1967	CUA's moral theology faculty and thousands of students begin five-day strike to protest Father Curran's dismissal.
April 24, 1967	Reinstated at CUA and promoted to associate professor.
July 30, 1967	Acts as spokesman for Catholic theologians dissenting from Humanae Vitae's teaching on artificial contraception.
July 13, 1979	Notified that Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is investigating writings.
Oct. 26, 1979-Aug. 1984	Exchange of letters between Father Curran elaborating views and Congregation criticizing responses.
Sept. 17, 1985	Receives letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stating the Congregation was "in a position to bring the inquiry to a conclusion" and allowing two months' time to reconsider.
Dec. 1985	Suggested compromise to Congregation whereby he would not teach sexual ethics courses in return for recognition as Catholic theologian in good standing.
March 8, 1986	Meets with Congregation officials in Rome.
March 11, 1986	Friends for Father Curran form in Rochester, distribute letters to pastoral ministers soliciting support.
March 12, 1986	Bishop Matthew H. Clark issues statement supporting compromise.
March 25, 1986	Dismisses retraction, renews request for compromise.
Aug. 14, 1986	Congregation sends letter to Bishop Clark, Archbishop James A. Hickey and the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, describing final decision that Father Curran is neither "suitable nor eligible" to teach Catholic moral theology.

Vatican verdict

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"This decision was presented to His Holiness in an audience granted to the undersigned Prefect on the 10th of July of this year and he approved both its content and the procedure followed," the cardinal said.

In closing, Cardinal Ratzinger expressed "the hope that this regrettable, but necessary, outcome to the Congregation's study

might move you to reconsider your dissenting positions and to accept in its fullness the teaching of the Catholic Church."

Upon learning of the Congregation's decision, Bishop Matthew H. Clark, who remains Father Curran's bishop despite the theologian's 20-year tenure in Washington, issued the following statement: "In recognition of the ultimate authority of the Holy Father, who has confirmed this decision, and in a spirit of collegiality with him, I accept the decision as the final word on this matter and urge all members of our community to

accept it in a similar spirit.

"So that there will be no confusion," Bishop Clark continued, "I state as well that the decision does not affect Father Curran's good standing as a priest of the Diocese of Rochester where he will always be welcome to exercise his priestly ministry."

As of Courier-Journal press time (noon Tuesday, Aug. 19), Father Curran had made no statements to the press. His office informed callers that no statement would be made until a press conference scheduled in Washington for Wednesday, August 20.

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