

Actions aimed at silencing dissent dishearten local scholars

To many of the theologians and Church leaders who predicted a conservative backlash in the wake of the Vatican's censure of moral theologian Father Charles E. Curran, the events of last week provided an unwelcome corroboration.

On Thursday, Sept. 4, Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen and Auxiliary Bishop Donald Wuerl jointly announced that the Vatican had ordered the archbishop to submit to the authority of his auxiliary in five areas of teaching, including birth control, annulments, clergy formation and laicization, and ministry to homosexuals.

The announcement came on the heels of another directive issued by the vicar general

of the Archdiocese of New York, Bishop Joseph T. O'Keefe. He warned archdiocesan pastors not to invite speakers who disagree with Church teachings into their parishes.

Meanwhile, earlier in the week, Father Curran announced that he would appeal the Vatican's decision that he is "unsuitable and ineligible" to teach Catholic theology through the Catholic University of America's grievance process.

The immediate reactions of several local theologians and religious educators to the evidence of growing conflict between American Catholics and the Vatican hovered between disappointment and gloom. But most remained optimistic about long-term prospects for renewal in the Church.

The Vatican's action in regard to Archbishop Hunthausen "raises serious questions about the role of the ordinary in a diocese," according to William J. Sullivan, associate professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College.

But Sullivan said he is most concerned about the pastoral implications of actions he termed "attempts to squelch dissent from above."

"It's going to make it very hard for the laity to consult with priests on moral issues. There's very little consultation going on now," he said. "By defining certain issues as beyond discussion ... you may end up with a teaching Church that is clear, unified and decisive, but that is teaching no one. If the absence of dissent is what you want, then you've achieved it."

Father William M. Kelly, SJ, director of the Loyola Institute for Ministry's Extension Program in Ithaca, believes the Vatican's actions have been politically motivated and have confused rather than clarified Church teaching in the minds of ordinary Catholics.

Meanwhile, in contrast to their strong pastoral statements on peace and the economy, he said, many hierarchical leaders in the United States are tolerating injustice within their own ranks silently.

"These are issues people are aware of — that take on flesh and blood to them," Father Kelly said. "That's where our leadership is falling down."

Father Joseph Brennan, director of religious studies at the University of Rochester, said he was not surprised, but was disheartened by the recent actions.

"It seems obvious to me that these events are part of a bigger picture that has been developing over the past few years. None of it comes as a bolt out of the blue," he said.

But Father Brennan termed the Vatican's action in Seattle as "a very strange and bizarre kind of thing."

"It's very hard to comprehend how he (Archbishop Hunthausen) and the auxiliary are going to work this out in practice," he said.

The swing toward conservatism is not limited to the Catholic Church, nor even to religion, he noted. The growth of Protestant fundamentalism and the emergence of radical Islamic sects are also indications of a general worldwide shift toward authoritarianism and orthodoxy.

Christine Bochen, chairperson of religious studies at Nazareth College, agreed that Rome's attempt to enforce "a kind of conformity" reflects an international attempt "to rediscover a sense of security and certainty."

"In the larger social context of shifting values and challenges to established institu-

tions, it is easy to understand why a religious institution would try to reassert its control," she said. "People on both sides of the issue are interested in revitalizing a climate of faith ... They are hungry for religious truth. But the question is how we feed that hunger."

Recent events illustrate that the Catholic Church "is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with a variety of opinions," Bochen said. "A church in which unity is identified with uniformity of thought can undermine true Christian unity. Silencing respectful, carefully thought-out dissent is not the way to ensure true Christian unity."

Most of those interviewed remained optimistic despite the conflict, because they believe that the current movement toward conservatism will prove to be a passing phase in the overall life of the Church.

Father Brennan, a Biblical scholar pointed out that the history of the Church throughout both Old and New Testaments has been marked by "constant disagreement, debate and conflict."

"Growth is never achieved without effort, difficulty and a certain amount of pain," he said.

Alice McDowell, a faculty member in Ithaca College's department of philosophy and religion and a board member at St. Bernard's Institute, hopes that growth will open the Church to the influence of other religious traditions.

"It could be that we're on the brink of a new era, that out of this will emerge a new openness to other types of Eastern, esoteric and even totally new traditions," she said. "It seems like a present institution has to be open to that, or it will crumble."

Archbishop

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In response to the announcement, Bishop Matthew H. Clark wrote: "I know this is a difficult moment in the life of the Archdiocese of Seattle, but I am sure the faith of the community will sustain them and that God will bring new life out of present suffering."

"I have expressed my support for Archbishop Hunthausen in his pastoral leadership and will continue my prayer for Bishop Wuerl and all of the people of the archdiocese as they work together to build up the kingdom of God."

Bishop Wuerl was associate general secretary of the Diocese of Pittsburgh when he was named auxiliary of Seattle in December 1985.

From 1981 to 1985 he was rector of St. Paul Seminary in Pittsburgh, and he served in Rome from 1969 to 1979 as secretary to the late Cardinal John Wright, head of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy.

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