

National/International Report

Archbishop Weakland blasts swing toward 'rigidity, fear'

Milwaukee (NC) — Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee has sharply criticized "rigidity" and "fear" as the response of Church leaders to the ferment in Catholic moral theology today.

"Fanaticism and small-mindedness," he said, are not the way to achieve the Church's legitimate goal of "purity and integrity of doctrine."



Archbishop Weakland

He said the Church has too often been so afraid of new cultural and intellectual challenges that "leaders were picked ... by the rigidity of their orthodoxy, so that often second-rate and repressive minds, riding on the waves of that fear, took over."

Archbishop Weakland made his comments in two successive columns entitled "The Price of Orthodoxy," which appeared Sept. 11 and 18 in Milwaukee's archdiocesan newspaper, the Catholic Herald.

He particularly warned against a return to the type of authoritarian reaction the Church had to "modernism" at the start of the 20th century.

"In the first decade of the century," he wrote, "during the pontificate of Pope Pius X, seminaries were closed, theological periodicals were suppressed, a network of 'informers' in each diocese was organized, oaths were repeatedly taken, intellectually rigid bishops were appointed, and fear and distrust were everywhere in the U.S.A."

"Modernism" — loosely defined as the attempt by Catholic theologians to resolve apparent conflicts between biblical accounts and 19th-century scientific and historical discoveries — was condemned by Pope Pius X.

"Today's challenges to the Church, on the other hand, come mostly from psychology and the human sciences," Archbishop Weakland said. "In fact, it is not by accident

that the troubled territory today is sexuality and its relationship to the whole of human behavior, that is, moral issues."

The archbishop mentioned no current individuals or movements by name, but the most prominent figure facing Church discipline over his views on sexuality and morality is Father Charles E. Curran.

In a detailed discussion of modernism, Archbishop Weakland reflected the view that suppression of the movement by Church officials dealt a major blow to Catholic intellectual activity and scholarship for decades.

"The theological suppression of the first decade of the century and the fears it instilled resulted in a total lack of theological creativity in the U.S.A. for half a century," he wrote. "It also left us unprepared for the dramatic changes of the '60s. We are only now again coming to life and only now producing in the areas of biblical exegesis and theology world-renowned scholars."

According to the archbishop, just a decade before the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, the theology developing in Europe which became the basis for the council was considered "novel and suspect" by Americans.

He stressed the Church's need to defend sound doctrine but said, "Repeating old formulas does not answer new problems; they demand new thinking in the light of held truths."

The way to do this, he said, is not by "suppression of theological creativity and lack of growth."

As "a better way of proceeding," he suggested a return to the approach offered by Pope John XXIII as he opened Vatican II.

In his speech inaugurating the council, Pope John argued that the Church today should "make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity," fighting error "by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations."

"Was good Pope John being naive?" Archbishop Weakland asked. "Many, I fear, think so."

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