

Father Richard P. McBrien

## Essays in Theology



### Bishop Pfeifer's pastoral letter

Bishop Michael Pfeifer, OMI, of San Angelo, Texas, is not one of the best-known members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, but he has recently issued a pastoral letter that merits more attention than it seems to have received thus far.

Although the letter does not mention Father Charles Curran by name, it was clearly prompted by the Curran case. (The complete text is reprinted in the November 13 issue of *Origins*.)

The pastoral letter places freedom at the very heart of divine revelation and of God's dealings with us. "The only love that God wants," Bishop Pfeifer writes, "is a love that is freely given from the heart."

If we freely withhold that love, God still remains utterly faithful to us. Indeed, God never violates our freedom, even when we use it sinfully.

It is in this sanctuary of conscience, the bishop continues, that "we finally choose to activate the implications of our Christian call in our lives."

Since that is the case, it is essential that our consciences be well-formed. This requires (in addition to prayer) a constant dialogue with God's revelation in the Bible, with the ongoing tradition and official teaching of the Church, and with our experience and understanding of the daily demands that face us as individuals and as a community.

Therefore, although the official teaching of the Church is a major dialogue-partner in the formation of conscience, it is not the only one.

"There is much about our faith," Bishop Pfeifer notes, "which is prior to church teaching." He mentions natural law, the Ten Commandments, and Scripture itself, by way of examples. He acknowledges that the interpretation and application of all these to one's daily life requires guidance. Throughout Christian history, he notes, such guidance has come from different sources.

Almost from the very beginning, bishops have provided it. Indeed, in the earliest centuries, bishops were often chosen from the ranks of those who had shown an ability to offer such guidance. Later, at Vatican I (1870), the special teaching role of the pope was more clearly defined.

But the pope and the bishops are not the only sources of guidance. Theologians, too, assist the Church and its official teachers by offering "careful and mature reflection on our faith and its implications."

"Their writings and teaching also form a part of the teaching of the church," Bishop Pfeifer observes, "and they participate in the assistance that is

given to us all in the formation of our Christian conscience."

Where does all this leave the individual believer? He (or she) is expected to love God in freedom and to act always, and only, in accordance with the dictates of conscience, which, in turn, must be well-formed. The hierarchy and theologians together, although in different ways, contribute to the formation of conscience. However, "freedom and responsibility cannot be replaced by authority in the Christian life."

No one of us can simply sit back, Bishop Pfeifer declares, and wait for the hierarchy or theologians to "figure things out or to make up our minds for us." In those many areas in which no final assurance can be given, we have to remain open to the promptings of the Spirit as well as to the guidance provided by the Church's official teachers and theologians.

But sometimes there are conflicts between what the official teachers say and what certain theologians say. At times, in fact, the work of theologians leads in directions which seem to contradict some official teaching.

We learn from the history of the Church that official teachings sometimes have had to be refined or even corrected; at other times, dissident theological opinions have had to be discarded; and in still other instances, both points of view were left to stand as complementary to one another.

What was true in the past is still true today. Few matters of faith and morals admit of simple solutions.

Given the current pastoral situation in the United States, Bishop Pfeifer urges that we be more concerned about helping members of an increasingly sophisticated laity to resolve their consciences on disputed issues. They need to develop a more adequate adult theological understanding of the New Testament and of church doctrines, he argues. And they should be encouraged to see that moral questions "belong not in a context of simple legal demands alone, but in a much broader context of God's loving covenant with believers."

To be sure, the Church's official teachers must continue to assist those striving for truth and for a life that is faithful to the Gospel.

On the other hand, while our membership in the Church implies that we take this assistance seriously, "our humanity forbids that we simply resign from the struggle and insist that others make our choices for us."

Wise pastoral words from San Angelo.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

## On the Right Side



### Why a priest?

"You seem happy to be a priest. What would you have liked to be if you hadn't become a priest?" asked a young collegian whom I admire.

There never has been a time, since I went to St. Andrew's Seminary in 1927 and continued at St. Bernard's through ordination in 1935, that I have wanted to be anything but a priest. It annoys me to hear people pleading for men to embrace the priesthood as if they were asking someone to do God and the Church a favor. Even an occasional seminarian seems to have such a mentality. I remember one who said to me, "I don't mind becoming a priest. It's all right with me." Thank the Lord he quit before ordination.

In our seminary days, we spent our time studying, praying, playing, griping about the food — and working strenuously not to be fired from the seminary. Tragically, during the mid-1930s, several good seminarians were dropped because the bishop thought we would have more priests than we could use. Older priests called this action "ecclesiastical birth control," and we have suffered greatly because of it. Some of these seminarians were taken by other dioceses and have done excellent work. Some left and married, and have become a special kind of parishioner, retaining a deep devotion to the Church and its care.

The answer to my young collegian was, "I've never wanted to be anything but a priest. But if I were not, I'd like to be a waiter in a restaurant. Why? Because I like to serve people — a worthy attribute in the priesthood itself — and I should like the challenge of trying to satisfy so many different kinds of people: the fussy, the ornery, the polite, the pleasant, the bright, the dull, the happy, the depressed, the good, the so-so and the bad. After all, that's what we are doing constantly in the priesthood, but, more directly, to bring people closer to the heart of God."

These thoughts came to me as I read "Journal of a Parish Priest" by Father Rawley Meyers (Our Sunday Visitor Press: \$3.75). It is a record of incidents and thoughts by a priest ordained 30 years ago. He offers the perspective of many years of service as a teacher, a writer and a parish priest. His memoir records events with laughter, tears and devotion from the vantage point of the

priesthood. A few excerpts follow:

"As I grow older in the priesthood, I notice that God has blessed me with an even greater love for the Mass. As a young priest, I was quite self-conscious and aware at Mass that people were watching me. I hoped I would not make a mistake and be embarrassed. After 30 years as a priest, I find I don't think much about others at Mass. I think of Jesus. He is there. That, I tell my high-school students, is the reason for attending Mass. I know my homilies are not always good. I know the music can be mediocre and the ceremonies common-place. But I think these complaints are of little importance compared to the singular honor of being with Christ. There is no prayer like the Mass. At Mass, we pray through, with and in Jesus..."

"If asked to name a saint of our times, I would say Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day or good Pope John. I especially loved Pope John because of his delicious sense of humor. When someone asked him how many priests worked in the Vatican he replied: 'About half.' He said of himself: 'I intend to use joviality, pleasantness and happiness with all people.' And he certainly did..."

"In the seminary there was an old woman, a seamstress, who came after lunch the first Sunday of each month, and anyone could bring torn clothing for mending. The priest director of students was a fuddy-duddy about anything the least bit indelicate. He would announce to us that the seamstress — whose name was Mrs. Nicholshitz — had arrived. And to our amusement, he would say: 'The seamstress, Mrs. Nichol..., you know whom I mean — is here today.' When she raised her prices, some of the students began to call her 'Mrs. Dimeschitz'..."

"I was called out of bed last night to the college infirmary. On the bed was a college boy, thrashing about, gasping wildly for breath. When I came in, I would not have given him one chance in a million. After anointing him, a nurse invited me to sit in the only chair in the small room. I did and prayed the rosary... This morning I went to the hospital to check up on his condition. He smiled a big smile. I introduced myself and said, 'I was with you last night — but I don't suppose you remember.' He replied: 'I don't remember your face, Father, but I sure remember seeing the Roman collar. Thanks.'"

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