

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## Free speech and public opinion

Nearly 30 years ago, the late German Jesuit, Father Karl Rahner, wrote a little book entitled *Free Speech in the Church* (Sheed & Ward, 1959).

"Apart from anything else," Rahner insisted, "the Church today should be more careful than ever before not to give even the slightest impression that she is of the same order as those totalitarian states for whom outward power and sterile, silent obedience are everything and love and freedom nothing, and that her methods of government are those of the totalitarian systems in which public opinion has become a Ministry of Propaganda."

Without free speech in the Church, Rahner argued, there can be no public opinion within the Church. And if there is no public opinion within the Church, there is no way for the Church to make decisions that reflect and respect what is actually going on.

Rahner was simply following the teaching of Pope Pius XII, who, in an address to the International Catholic Press Congress in 1950, had said, "Only those who know little or nothing about the Catholic Church will be surprised to hear this. For she too is a living body, and there would be something missing from her life if there were no public opinion within her, a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be responsible."

The present leadership of the Church, however, seems more worried about the dangers of a freely generated public opinion than it is about the risk of scandal, which the suppression of a legitimate freedom of expression might cause.

Thus, it seems that whenever there is a choice between freedom and order, the current Vatican administration always prefers order.

But this is not a preference that is required by official Catholic teaching. On the contrary.

In both its *Declaration on Religious Freedom* and its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, the Second Vatican Council defended not only freedom of conscience, but also freedom of expression, i.e., the freedom to contribute to public opinion within the Church.

The Council declared that "all the faithful, clerical and lay possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence" (Pastoral Constitution, n. 62).

Pope John XXIII had made the same point in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: "By the natural law every human be-

ing has...the right to freedom in searching for truth and in expressing and communicating his opinions."

We even find this teaching embodied in the Code of Canon Law, newly revised in 1983.

The Christian faithful "have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful..." (canon 212).

The same freedom of expression belongs also to theologians. Thus, canon 218: "Those who are engaged in the sacred disciplines enjoy a lawful freedom of inquiry and of prudently expressing their opinions on matters in which they have expertise, while observing a due respect for the magisterium of the Church."

These teachings and canonical principles are an important corrective to a view that still prevails among many non-Catholics: namely, that Catholicism and free speech are about as compatible as Iran and Iraq.

We Catholics are even admonished these days by non-Catholics like neo-conservative editor Norman Podhoretz and others, who proclaim that being Catholic means abiding by the rules, and those rules are made and enforced by the pope.

An excerpt from a recent letter to U.S. News & World Report says it all: "The Catholic Church is not a democratic institution. It is governed by its founder, Jesus Christ, through His representative on Earth, the pope."

The writer begs all the important questions. The Catholic Church is not, and never has been, an absolute monarchy. Supreme power in the Church is also vested in an ecumenical council. Moreover, the bishops are not mere vicars of the pope.

In any case, blind obedience is no virtue. God asks of us a faith and love that are freely given.

"Human society," Pope John XXIII declared, "is realized in freedom." Such a society is one "in which men and women communicate knowledge to each other in the light of truth."

That's how public opinion is formed. Without freedom of expression, public opinion is impossible. The absence of public opinion, Pope Pius XII insisted, would be "a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be responsible."

Freedom of expression, therefore, is not only for the sake of the individual. It is for the sake of the Church itself.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## A troubled Catholic

I hate to use the phrase "the pain people feel" because it is a phrase constantly used by "Fancy Jane" feminist sisters who agonize over their condition. Their pain intensifies as they ponder the reality of male priests, male curial officials (though some women are now chancellors of dioceses and other such), male bishops, male anything they cannot horn in on. A woman of superlative pain is the television-prone Sister Trexler, who expostulated her anti-male animus on a recent TV program, "Take Two," by declaring her pro-abortion stance. She denounced the Holy Father ("who doesn't understand"), the Roman Curia (male), the Vatican (confined to a small territory that limits the theological comprehension). Where would she get a hearing if she were not a consecrated sister?

These thoughts occurred to me as I read a letter from a man in Alaska with whom I have occasional correspondence. A woman who became a good friend to me through the Archbishop Sheen tapes introduced us, through the mail, saying that this man had serious problems with the modern Church. The lady is a convert to the Church, instructed by a learned Jesuit at Seattle University many years ago. She has persevered, despite the pain (there's that word again) she has suffered from so many aberrations in her parish from "Fancy Dan" liturgists, off-the-wall theology, and an awe-inspiring wretched health, which she endures with a Christian fortitude that humbles me, since I have so little of the virtue. My new Alaskan correspondent wrote:

"You must have a memory like an IBM computer. Who in the world would remember a guy like me way up here in Alaska? When you didn't answer my questions in my last letter, I assumed you were a part of the problem, but now I see by your term 'Fancy Dan priests' you may be part of the solution.

"While in the Marines, I always sought out a Catholic church where I could kneel in front of Our Lady. What peace and serenity I felt while kneeling before her image. Let me tell you an experience I had while I was stationed in Korea.

"There were seven of us guys who

chummed around together, all of different religious backgrounds. We made a pact that we would take turns going to each other's churches each Sunday — whether Baptist, Methodist or some other denomination. Of course, the Baptist didn't know what to do. We couldn't understand the Korean minister, so we all felt totally lost. It was the same with the other guys and their religion, until it came my turn to take my buddies to a Korean Catholic Church.

"The week before, I had gotten missals from our chaplain and told my friends what to expect, what the inside of the church would look like, and that they could follow the Mass in Latin, with parallel English translation. When my Sunday came, we went to Mass, and this little tiny priest came out on the altar with his two (male) servers and pronounced: 'In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, Amen. Introibo ad altare Dei.' He completed the Mass in Latin, exactly as I told my friends it would be. We could and did follow along the entire Mass. The moral of this story is, Father, that two of those guys took instruction and later became Catholics.

"I didn't mean to unload on you, but today when my wife showed me the enclosed article (an ad for Tridentine Mass by the Lefebvre Society) I felt a glimmer of light, until I talked with 'Mrs. X' (our mutual friend). She said that the society is not sanctioned by the pope. Hence my enclosed letter to Pope John Paul II. I bet you never expected this epistle from a guy you don't even know. Thanks ahead of time if you can help us."

I do think I understand the pain (that word again) of the Lefebvre people at the loss of honored and loved traditions, beauty and holiness. And I think it was a great mistake and a dreadful cruelty to deprive earnest people of the option of the Tridentine Mass. But I regret that these sincere people have separated themselves from the pope and the universal Church, and pray that they will return to their true spiritual home. The matter is too complex to discuss in this column, but we should have Christ's love and understanding for a hurting group.

### Physicians guild plans retreat for health care professionals

The Catholic Physicians Guild of the Diocese of Rochester is planning its second retreat for health care professionals. The retreat will be offered Friday through Sunday, March 6-8, at the Cenacle Center for

Spiritual Renewal, 693 East Avenue, in Rochester.

Father John L. Ostdiek, OFM, will lead the retreat. For more information, contact Father Donald F. Schwab at Rochester General Hospital, (716)338-4000.

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