



Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

The Vatican document on bioethics has drawn considerable notice in the short time it has been available to us. Some have greeted it with rave reviews, because it addresses head-on what most acknowledge to be issues so complex as to cry out for ethical norms by which these issues can be developed and decided. Others have reacted negatively, even scornfully, to what they judge to be an unwarranted intrusion into matters best left to scientists and technicians to decide. Another significant group rejoices in the articulation of principals offered by the instruction, but takes exception to the way these principles are applied to particular situations.

Whatever your opinion of the document, you will likely agree that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been instrumental in stimulating a public debate about these issues — a debate unprecedented in this country for its intensity and publicity. Whether the discussion has achieved a depth proportionate to its importance is not yet certain.

I have read articles both in favor of and opposed to the positions taken by the Congregation; in my judgment, these articles were thoughtful and constructive. But I have also seen some articles — expressing both points of view — that I thought reflected insufficient acquaintance with the content of the document. It renders service to no one to say that the document came from the Church or some agency of the Church, and, therefore, we will accept it or reject it without a serious study of its content.

My own approach to such significant documents is to take some time to understand and absorb their content, to hear the reflections of experts in the areas treated in them, to speak with pastoral colleagues about how best to work with such material and to consider the impact it has on people who will be most deeply affected by it.

I take that position because I judge it to be most respectful to the documents themselves and to all for whom I am meant to serve as a pastoral teacher. It seems a poor way to teach adults simply to say, either accept this or don't do this because I told you so. For better or for worse, such a method is more likely to generate resistance, even resentment, than it is to persuade people or to involve them in an active search for understanding. And it seems to me that such activity should be finest fruit of the Church's pastoral initiatives.

We need to receive such documents with the utmost respect and with a disposition of openness to their content. It should be our intention and effort to recognize the truth contained in them and to make that truth our own. When our hopes are not realized, we need to have the frankness, freedom and respect to place our questions and difficulties before the wisdom of the wider community. In that way, adults learn, and respect for and understanding of our faith tradition is deepened.

A concluding footnote: the manner I have just outlined of receiving and treating documents of substance is not without difficulties. Among them are the interest of the communications media and their understandable desire for immediate comment. If we received these documents sufficiently in advance to study them carefully, it would be easy to have statements ready upon their publication. The truth is that I normally receive such documents on the same day as the mass media. Sometimes I receive them *after* they do. Honestly.

Peace to all.

The Editor's Desk

In reading our front-page article on the Southern Tier "listening session," I quickly realized that some of our more conservative readers will inevitably find fault with its emphasis on liberal views. I thought about that for awhile, deciding that such an emphasis could not have been avoided, because liberal views predominated the session.

If the article had been one in which a Courier-Journal reporter selected people to interview on the upcoming synod, ethics would require us to balance the report. But — because the article was about an event — it would be unfair for us to go beyond the session itself in search of opposing opinions. If conservative people wanted to express their views, they should have participated in the listening session.

I have the same feeling about liberal readers who complain — usually in off-the-record, personal letters — that our editorial page is dominated by sniping and narrow-minded epistles. "OK," I say to myself, "but are the liberals willing to stand up and be counted?" By and large, the answer is a resounding "No!"

My favorite example is that of a woman who called a few weeks ago to tell me that she really enjoyed Father Richard McBrien's column and to ask that it not be dropped, despite many reader complaints. Because of the dearth of positive reviews on the column, I asked the woman if she would be willing to send a letter that we could publish. "I'd like to," she told me, facetiously, "but my neighbor really hates the column, and I don't want my house to be burned down."

Some people have told me that they do not write rebuttals to the letters that have been published, because they do not have time to engage in running debates. With respect to forums like the listening session, readers have told me that they do not participate because they feel the events themselves are expressly designed for people of a certain ideological bent.

I don't want to make fun of these people and the many others who are reluctant to take stands; personal experience has taught me that sticking your neck out can have unpleasant consequences. If you've got the facts wrong, you're embarrassed; if your view is unpopular, you're deluged with criticism. After a few stints on the firing line, you may decide never to open your mouth again.

Yet such reticence effectively negates individuals' rights to representation. What right to criticize can be claimed by liberal readers who are unwilling to write letters to the editor? What right would conservative readers have to criticize the views expressed at a forum if they did not attend and make their own views heard?

I guess that no matter who's talking, the opposition always claims to be the Silent Majority. I'm not sure about the majority part, but many people could rightly be labeled silent.

Letters

Critics of bishop termed 'rigorists'

To the Editor:

At last the so-called "Concerned Roman Catholics" have declared their real agenda — to get rid of Bishop Matthew Clark (C-J Letters, March 19: "Concerned Catholics speak out"). This is nothing new under the sun. In the early centuries of the Church, numerous heresies involved those who chose to be so rigorous and strict in their performance of their religion that they had no room for mercy and compassion, no room for the human struggle to grow and develop, no room for anyone who dared to disagree with them. In some cases, the local heretics appealed to the pope — only to reject him when they discovered that he disagreed with them. The textbooks and history books recount the ancient record of the Manicheans, the Montanists, the Donatists and the Pelagians.

Now, in the letters to the editor of the Courier-Journal, the same misguided concerns for rigorism seek to mislead the good people of the Church. With words and slogans that sound orthodox, the rigorists sometimes confuse those loyal members of the Church who seek to live within the limits of faithfulness to God and conscience and Church teaching — limits that include Christian freedom and responsible criticism.

Let us remember in prayer our brothers and sisters who have misunderstood our bishop, who have misinterpreted the Gospel's call for faithfulness to be a call for rigorism. Let us remember in prayer our brothers and sisters who must be hurting so badly that they have lashed out at the one who leads our local Church.

And let us also remember Bishop Matthew Clark. Look at the man — he is among us daily, in our parishes, at our Masses. Graciousness and kindness pervade his presence. His preaching is gentle, filled with God's compassion. His weekly column in the Courier-Journal tells of his prayerful concern for the people of the diocese. He has just returned from a 40-day retreat in Guelph, Ontario. His priorities and his loyalties certainly are in the right place. Let us affirm and support Bishop Clark as a faithful and compassionate shepherd of God's people.

Father William Lum
Newman Community
Catholic Campus Parish
University of Rochester
Rochester

Reader decries St. Mary's renovation effort

To the Editor:

The article in the Courier Journal (March 5: "Downtown Church kicks off worship space renovation plan"), covering the renovation of Old St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester, saddened this reader.

Although the parish was formed the same year that Rochester received its city charter (1834), the present edifice was erected in 1858. The first church, bought from the Methodists, was located on St. Paul St. opposite Ely.

"Rev. Thomas McEvoy purchased the present site on South St. and commenced his laborious work of building, which bore him to the grave when

success had crowned his efforts. He went to New York to make preparations for the dedication, and died suddenly before returning" (see Peck's History of Rochester, New York 1884). On August 23, 1858, Bishop John Timon of Buffalo consecrated St. Mary's Church. For 139 years, the church has served the parish continuously, a tribute to the hard-working people whose money made this possible. Their efforts provided a venerable landmark for Rochester.

Today, St. Mary's is under sentence, its interior to be redone in the mode of the day. The Catholic atmosphere will be relegated to a small alcove, one that will provide a place for private prayer and a repository for the Eucharist. The present sanctuary

will be stripped and the stenciled artwork on the ceiling removed.

One wonders how the Holy Father would respond, if a similar suggestion were made to modernize the Sistine Chapel! Rochesterians revere Old St. Mary's as dearly as Romans do the Sistine Chapel.

As for the \$500,000 needed to fund the project, it could go a long way toward alleviating the plight of many who exist within the shadow of St. Mary's Church, or could be used to build the modern roadside chapel on the ruins of St. Joseph's Church. This way, we all could enjoy the best of two worlds.

Lorraine Arbor
Red Road
Rochester

Implications of 1973 abortion decision clarified

To the Editor:

The program "Youth Sowers of Hope, Builders of Peace, April 5, 1987" for the Bishop's Day with Youth states: "In the United States, abortions are legal through the first 12 weeks of pregnancy." This is incorrect.

On January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court, in its Roe vs. Wade and Doe vs. Bolton decision, struck down all laws against abortion that had in any way protected unborn babies. The ruling legalized abortion in all 50 states for the full nine months of pregnancy, for social and economic reasons.

The 1973 Supreme Court ruling authorized: 1) no legal restrictions at all on abortion in the first three months; 2) no restrictions from then until viability, except those needed to make the procedure safer for the mother; 3) allowing abortion until the time of birth if one licensed physician judged it necessary for the mother's health. Of course, "health" was defined as including social, economic, psychological and familial problems, as well as the age of the mother.

In June, 1970, New York state passed the first abortion-on-demand

law, allowing abortions through the 24th week of pregnancy. In April 1972, New York repealed its law, but Governor Nelson Rockefeller vetoed the repeal, and the law remained in force.

The Supreme Court decision in 1973 overruled all other state laws concerning abortion. Since that decision, nearly 20 million babies have been killed by abortion at various stages of development, right up until the time of birth.

Joann C. May
Hermitage Road
Rochester

Writer defends Marian exaltation after reading recent column

To the Editor:

Following Father McBrien's suggestion in his column on the upcoming Marian year, I have re-read the Magnificat. Contrary to his implication that exaltation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is misguided, however, I find in Mary's hymn of praise that God Himself, regarding the "lowliness of His handmaid," has "exalted the lowly."

Recognizing the exaltation bestowed on the Blessed Virgin by divine prerogative, the Franciscan scholar Venerable Duns Scotus noted in a commentary on the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception that "Christ is the most perfect mediator . . . and He had no more exalted relation to any person than to the Blessed Virgin Mary." There is no room for hesitation on our part to exalt the Mother of the Church where her founder Himself has seen fit to do so.

In his reflections on the ecumenical dimension of Marian doctrine, Father McBrien correctly points out that a purely sentimental devotion to Mary beyond the limits of sound teaching is imprudent and adversely affects both the Catholic adherent

and the non-Catholic Christian with whom union is sought. However, Father McBrien loses sight of the fact that the more recent Marian teachings, including those of Vatican II, make clear that ecumenical outreach is to be accomplished with no sacrifice of doctrinal truth.

In the same apostolic exhortation cited by Father McBrien in support of down-playing Marian emulation and devotion unrelated to social teaching, Pope Paul VI also noted the transcendent importance of Mary in the lives of Christian faithful by noting that "love for the Church will become love for Mary,

and vice versa, since one cannot exist without the other" (Apostolic Exhortation on Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, February 2, 1974, no. 28).

Catholics surely do no harm to the fullness of authentic truth, which we owe in love to our separated Christian brothers and sisters by confidently living, in filial humility, according to the last words of Pope John XXIII: "Mater mea, fiducia mea" (My mother, my trust).

John F. Wagner Jr.
Lark Street
Rochester

Lauds McBrien column

To the Editor:

With all due respect to the views of Jean Guzzetta (C-J letters, March 5: "Bishops issue sex-clinic call to arms"), don't even think about giving up Father Richard McBrien's column. It raises my spirits and hopes for the future of our beloved Church.

Helen L. Rubar
Shannon Street
Bath

Guidelines

The Courier-Journal welcomes your opinions. Letters must bear the writers' signatures, full addresses and telephone numbers. They must be brief, typed (double-spaced, please) and no longer than 1½ pages.

Letters should be mailed to: Opinion, Courier-Journal, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

We routinely condense letters, edit offensive words and libelous statements, and reserve the right to reject letters. Generally speaking, however, only limited grammatical corrections will be made, and the letters will reflect the writers' own styles.