

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## Vatican document on bioethics

The recent Vatican document on bioethics and human reproduction commanded an extraordinary amount of attention from the media in the United States, in spite of the document's highly technical nature.

There are at least two reasons. First, most of the technological developments have occurred in the United States. It has been estimated that U.S. practitioners of bioethics are at least a decade ahead of their European colleagues.

Secondly, the subject matter — its technically complex formulations notwithstanding — is sex, and sex always wins an audience.

Many reactions were predictable; some were not.

Among the predictables: Every bishop who was contacted praised the document. Diocesan spokespersons echoed that support.

Catholic theologians who specialize in bioethics dissented in part, while one theologian saw the document as just another instance of the hierarchy's anti-feminist bias. A few professional non-accredited people, affiliated with non-accredited institutes and loosely identified by the press as "theologians," applauded the Vatican declaration.

Among the unpredictables: The New York Times welcomed the document, saying that it "offers a considered set of views warranting attention as secular society argues out its bioethical views." Even Americans who disagree with the document in whole or in part, The Times concluded, are stimulated "to think through ethical responses of their own."

At the same time, there was some measure of restraint in the reactions of such politically conservative Catholics as Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich. They weren't quite sure how to assess the document's likely impact.

But those are all "reactions." The prize for prescience, hands down, goes to Father Richard McCormick, SJ, John A. O'Brien professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame. His article in the January 17 issue of the Jesuit weekly American, "The Vatican Document on Bioethics: Some Unsolicited Suggestions," could have been published, with only a few changes, the day after the Vatican declaration was released.

Directly or indirectly he predicted the following:

1) That the document would be chal-

lenged in part by professionally competent Catholics.

2) That the document would be produced without broad consultation and certainly without any input from leading Catholic bioethicists in the United States.

3) That its principal consultant would be Monsignor Carlo Caffarra, head of the Pontifical Institute for the Family, whose position even on the so-called "simple case" of *in vitro* fertilization involving only a husband and wife was at odds with the overwhelming majority of Catholic theologians.

4) That the document's footnotes would cite only ecclesiastical texts, especially papal statements, "as if the teaching would lose something of 'officialness' and be sullied or contaminated by admitting its dependence on contemporary scholarship."

5) That the document's moral reasoning would rest on "biologism" rather than "the nature of the person and the person's acts" (Vatican II's words). Biologist sees the procreative act solely in terms of the biological union of husband and wife.

6) That the document will be concealed and drafted in "almost investigative secrecy."

7) That, in spite of the fact that the field of bioethics is in constant flux, the document's conclusions would be presented without any tentativeness, or, as McCormick put it, without "appropriate modesty."

8) That the document would not "listen to and weigh seriously the experience and witness of other Christian bodies on (these) moral questions"

9) That the document would have a negative, condemnatory tone, calling attention to the "morally illicit" nature of the various techniques and procedures. (Vatican spokesmen have insisted that those who disobey these teachings would be committing mortal sin.)

10) That the document's principal conclusions would rest less on moral reasoning and scientific evidence than on the teaching authority (magisterium) of the Church.

Father McCormick did not mention this in his article, but back in the summer of 1978 a baby girl, Louise Brown, was born after being conceived in a Petri dish in a British laboratory.

Her mother received a congratulatory note from Albino Luciano who, the next month, would become Pope John Paul I.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## What of the Jesuits?

Our Holy Trinity Parish in Webster has given two missionaries, both Jesuits: 80-year-old Father Leo Wellich, in poor health but active in the Philippines, and 42-year-old Father Jerry Aman in Nigeria.

I have just finished *The Jesuits*, a 514-page book by the tempestuous Malachi Martin. He accuses the Jesuits of betraying St. Ignatius and the Jesuit tradition. There is a fundementum in re in the charges; for example, the Jesuit weekly *America* last year had a full edition on "Crisis in the Church." The contributors were no papal flagwavers, and included that frightful Rosemary Reuther, who has declared she has more devotion to the goddess Isis than to Mary. However, much of *The Jesuits* is Malachi's speculation and imagination.

When the Magisterium Series was presented at Mercy High School some nine years ago, under the aegis of Father L. James Callan and the Rochester Knights of Columbus, one speaker, historian Professor James Hitchcock, was asked: "What about Malachi Martin?" Martin had been an Irish Jesuit, brilliant and scholarly, and had worked in Rome. Some years ago he asked for and received laicization. He has married, and not only is in good standing in the Church, but is a staunch defender of traditional Catholicism. A Rochester station had presented a call-in show with Malachi as guest, answering questions about the Church. So Professor Hitchcock's questioner wondered what Malachi's status was. The professor chuckled and said, "Ah, Malachi! He's a good man, but tends to go off into Gaelic fantasy." And such seems to be the case with his latest book.

No one would suggest that either Father Welch or Father Aman is faithless to the Holy Father or the Ignatian tradition. Here is a March 23 letter from Father Aman in Nigeria. It reads as if he had just gotten off an Ignatian 30-day retreat.

"Thanks for your letter and the article on Father Bill Fankhauser. Do you know him? He's a good man. He's done a lot of work with the handicapped. We just had a visitor here who had done a lot with mentally retarded, Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Communitas

throughout the world. He spent four days with us to give a retreat to the prisoners we deal with in the Benin prison.

"He's a friend of our pastor, Father Bill Scanlon, SJ. Vanier is so gentle and Christ-like, able to find goodness in everyone. At the prison there were 300 to 400 prisoners attending his talks, and about as many 'free men' from outside, mostly from our parish.

"For Vanier there were no 'guilty' and 'not guilty' distinctions. We all stand guilty before the Lord. But he also had good news. We all are loved, and we are forgiven. The men in the condemned cells (10 to 15 packed in tiny windowless rooms) could not come to the talks, so he went to visit them after the talks. On the third day, he asked everyone to be quiet, and invited the condemned to sing from their cells across the yard. It was beautiful! He had invited them to offer something to the rest of the group. He got us all to see the value and dignity of these men in the row.

"On Friday evening, he was talking with some of the condemned men. He said, 'I'll see you tomorrow.' A few answered, 'If we're still here.' The next morning two of them were taken out and shot. The amazing thing was that all of us felt the loss that day, unlike usual when death of the condemned takes place as almost commonplace. It was a powerful retreat, and I learned a lot from living with Vanier for those four days.

"On May 20th, I'll begin my first home leave and start my flight from Nigeria. I should arrive in Rochester on May 22, my parent's 53rd wedding anniversary. Don't let them do anything too outrageous!

"We have a comparatively small baptismal class this Easter Vigil — only 215. Looking through the records for 1986, I saw that we baptized 1,823 people and married 224 couples. They haven't invented a number large enough to count the number of confessions. But it's more than statistics. There are wonderful people who invite us into their homes, their families and their hearts.

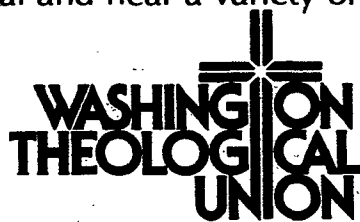
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