

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## Toning down Vatican II

Last week I did a "what if" column: what if the New Testament were still subject to editing and some of our fellow Catholics tried to "tone down" Jesus' hard sayings about legalism, the "first pope," and rich people? — to take but three make-believe examples.

This week's column is a "what about" piece: what about the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's for-real attempt to "tone down" one of the Second Vatican Council's most significant ecumenical teachings?

This actually happened just over two years ago in a "notification" sent by the Congregation to Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, OFM. The Vatican agency had been investigating Father Boff's book, *Church: Charism and Power*, for alleged violations of Catholic orthodoxy.

In the letter of March 20, 1987, signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, the Congregation charged Boff with a "relativizing concept of the church." In order to "justify" this error, the Congregation declared, Father Boff appealed inappropriately to the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n.8.

The text reads in part: "This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of its visible structure."

The key words are "subsists in" (*subsistit in* in Latin). Commentators on the Dogmatic Constitution have, from the beginning, interpreted this text to mean that the whole Church is larger than the Catholic Church alone. The Catholic church "subsists in" the wider ecumenical Church of Christ.

Such an interpretation changes traditional Catholic teaching on non-Catholic churches. If there is still "one, true Church," it is the whole body of Christ: Catholic, Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox alike.

On what basis was such an interpretation given?

In the previous rendition of the conciliar text, the copulative verb "is" (*est* in Latin) was used: "The Church . . . is the Catholic Church. . . ." Such a rendering would have simply reaffirmed the traditional teaching that the body of Christ and the Catholic Church are one and the same, as Pope Pius XII had declared in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*.

This teaching, however, had placed the non-Catholic communities in theological limbo. If they were not exactly "false" churches, they were at least "unreal" churches. Why? Because there is only one Church, and that Church is the Catholic Church.

Enter now the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and its explicit challenge of Father Leonardo Boff's appeal to article 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution.

Boff had merely taken the standard interpretation of the conciliar text. The change in verbs from "is" to "subsists in" had very great theological significance, Boff had argued. It showed that the council had moved beyond Pope Pius XII's teaching to a more ecumenical understanding of the Church.

Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation presented its own interpretation of that text: "But the council had chosen the word *subsistit* — subsists — exactly in order to make clear that one sole "subsistence" of the true church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementa ecclesiae* — elements of Church — exist . . ."

The Congregation accused Boff of "turning upside down the meaning of the council text on the church's subsistence," leading to "a profound misunderstanding of the Catholic faith on the church of God."

But the story does not end here. In two public addresses given in the United States last month, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, challenged the counter-interpretation by Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation.

Cardinal Willebrands argued that the council's change in language from "is" to "subsists in" marked a real change in the Catholic Church's approach to other churches. The one Church of Christ, he said, "goes beyond the visible limits of" the Catholic Church.

"Outside the Catholic Church," Cardinal Willebrands continued, "there exist many elements of sanctification and truth which are the gifts proper to the Church of Christ and therefore true ecclesial elements."

Following one of the lectures, Father Avery Dulles, SJ, asked Cardinal Willebrands directly about the "subsists in" controversy. Did the bishops at Vatican II understand "subsists in" as implying that the Church of Christ exists substantially only in the Catholic Church (which is the way Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation understands it)?

Cardinal Willebrands said that he could recall no such discussion at the council, nor could he recall anyone proposing such an interpretation.

Lesson to be learned from this whole episode: those who were soundly defeated at Vatican II are still trying to win by bureaucratic maneuver what they could not win in the public debates in St. Peter's Basilica more than 20 years ago.

Fortunately, people like Cardinal Willebrands are still around to set the facts straight.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## Epistolary observations

In the June 4 issue of the Courier-Journal, this column lamented that the Mormons send out 30,000 men and some women, aged 18 and 19 years, to spend two years evangelizing for their religion, and the Catholic Church tries to keep our young people in the Church by mollycoddling them, offering them entertainment and fun, and not expecting them to be evangelists and missionaries.

An interesting response came from an associate editor of Columbia, the Knights of Columbus monthly that goes to 1,400,000 members. What caught his attention was the concluding paragraph: "For years I have proclaimed that one of the best Catholic monthlies is Columbia. But I suspect the members do not read it. Let's get the women to read it, so they can tell their husbands."

From Patrick E. Brennan, Associate Editor of Columbia, New Haven, Conn. 06507:

"Your praise of Columbia in the June 4 Courier-Journal did not go unnoticed. It is true that the best articles in the world have no effect if they are not read. We constantly strive to motivate other councils to do likewise. Your Rochester-area Knights are to be commended for their efforts, especially with the recent rosary rally.

"In your column, you mention that our Church does not expect missionary activity from our youth, as do the Mormons. You did mention the fine youth retreat program offered by the Diocese of Rochester that is designed to 'deepen the personal faith of the teenagers.' Did I correctly detect your feeling that this does not precede a desire to spread the gospel?"

"The Mormons have numbers, but they also provide an outlet for youth in church ministry. The Catholic Church has more numbers, but my experience has been that priests often describe youth as the 'Church of tomorrow,' and ignore the fact that now is when they have the most energy, the most desire and the most time to devote

to sharing in the ministry of the Church.

"My own experience colors this observation. I attended a teen seminar conducted at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua in 1976. At that time I lived in Perry, N.Y. Father Hammond and his team of adults, young adults and others who conducted the teen seminar made me realize for the first time that my talents came from God and that I had an obligation to share them. The age of 17 was the beginning of my personal faith life.

"If this sounds like an endorsement for teen seminars, it is. My own case may be atypical, but I have met enough teen seminar alumni to know that it's not that uncommon."

Mr. Brennan's thoughts about utilizing the gifts of youth is worth pondering.

To Sister Patricia Schoelles, SSI, Theology Department, Nazareth College:

The Lord bless you for wanting your sisters to see the film, *Monsignor Quixote*, with Alec Guinness and Leo McKern. I read the book by Graham Greene three years ago, and re-read it to prepare for the film a few months ago. I am intrigued both by the book and the film for their Eucharistic emphasis.

The reason for the conclusion is threefold. 1) In a discussion with Monsignor Quixote on the existence of God, the lovable communist, Sancho (Leo McKern), snorts: "God. I don't believe in God. I've never seen Him. Have you?" Monsignor Q. (Alec Guinness) replies calmly, holding his fingers as the priest holds the sacred host: "I touch Him every day." An utter act of faith and conviction. 2) When Monsignor Q. is suspended a *divinis* by his dreadful bishop, he groans: "A sentence of death? No Mass. No confessions. A useless priest unable to serve others." 3) The gripping "dry Mass" at the end, which, Guinness wrote, has brought several people back to the Church and the practice of the faith. God bless you and all good sisters.

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### Catholic Alumni Clubs to host national convention in Virginia

The Catholic Alumni Clubs will hold their 30th national convention, "Williamsburg '87: A Revolutionary Celebration," from August 2-8 in Williamsburg, Virginia.

The featured speaker for the convention, which will take place at the Williamsburg Lodge, will be Father Thomas Lynch of the United States Catholic Conference. Father Lynch will present seminars on spiritual and sexual values.

Dinner dances, tennis and golf tournaments, tours of Colonial Williamsburg and after-hours parties will follow the seminars.

A post-convention weekend celebration will take place at the Ramada Oceanside Towers in Virginia Beach from August 8-11.

Last year's convention in Montreal attracted 400 members. The "early bird" registration cost for the week is \$540 double occupancy. For reservations or more information, call Kathleen Doherty, (714)730-0337 or write P.O. Box 2785, Costa Mesa, Calif. 92628.

The Catholic Alumni Clubs International is an association of 48 clubs nationwide. Members are college graduates who are free to marry in the Catholic Church.

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