

Columnists

A case of two popes?

By Father Paul J. Cuddy
From a Disturbed Auburnian:

"Dear Father,
"I am upset. Are there two Catholic Churches? Enclosed is an article from the March 6 Auburn Citizen on Father Curran's coming into our area at the request of a local priest. The Citizen narrates Father Curran's disagreement with Catholic teaching. Thus, it says, he accepts premarital sex as acceptable within limits, homosexual actions as long as the participants have a loving permanent relationship, divorce within limitations, abortions up to 21 days of conception, plus other items.
"Does this mean that the pope is wrong and Father Curran is right? Does it mean that we have two churches within the Catholic Church? Do give me an answer, please."

Reply: "It would seem that we do have two pontiffs. One is John Paul, pontiff over the universal church, and the other Charles Curran, the dissident teacher in the United States, opposing the Roman pontiff. Curran has a wide following of disciples in the United States among academic circles, younger priests and many middle-aged sisters. He has disarming charm which attracts many to his embrace.
"If the Catholic Church which Vatican II describes as 'one, holy, catholic, apostolic and unique' is to be true to Christ — who is the truth as well as the life — it must reject Curran's exaggerated pluralism. Aristotle teaches that 'two contradictories cannot both be true at the same and under the same circumstances.'

"Now we have two contradictories: one from Pope John Paul II; the other from Pope Charles I. Pope John Paul declares that the Catholic Church teaches that premarital sex, homosexuality, breaking of a valid marriage bond and abortion are always sinful. Pope Charles I declares: 'Not so. The Roman pope's teachings must be accepted only when he speaks *ex cathedra*. But the only *ex cathedra* pronouncement in a 100 years is the doctrine of the Assumption of Our Lady. This I accept as infallible. Then we must conclude that everything else is up for grabs!
"The Catholic Church is Christ teaching in the world. If anyone can accept or reject what he likes, that person has ceased to be a Catholic, even if he won't move out.
"In 1968 I first heard Curran give a dissi-

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dent lecture at St. Helen's, Rochester. Then this column recorded: 'Pope Paul VI requested, not that the study of contraception be stopped, but rather that theologians make their studies in the theological laboratories. Public discussion among unskilled in theological language and background would only confuse (the faithful)'. Almost 20 years later, Father Phillips, a scholarly priest wrote in his Brockport parish bulletin: 'Few are trained in the art of theology, or the skill of making the extremely subtle distinctions which must enter into theological thought, as we struggle to apply moral principles to the very issues of the day.'

"To which we say, Amen.
"But in that same Brockport article, Father Phillips stated that Curran was being maligned: 'Father Curran does not advocate abortion, or sodomy, or fornication or divorce.' The fact is that Father Curran did accept these positions, and does so today.

"In June 1968, I met Father Curran at Stella Maris Camp at Conesus. I accosted him: 'Father Charlie, how do you reconcile the request of Pope Paul VI with your broadcasting contradictory teachings to every Tom, Dick, and Nellie who are shaken by your theories?' With the smile that charms he replied: 'I have to follow the inspirations of the Holy Spirit!' With some pique I retorted: 'Do you think Pope Paul is devoid the Holy Spirit?'

"So the answer to your question — 'Are there two Churches within the Catholic Church?' — is no. Two contradictories cannot both be true at the same time and under the same circumstances. It was to Peter and His successors that Christ gave the charge: 'Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep! Do we follow the Church guided by Peter's successor, or do we follow a charming dissident, a pontiff in his own realm?'

Do collars make the priest?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
One bishop recently sent all his priests a copy of an article on clerical dress, written some time ago by a Jesuit who says he's been wearing the same Roman collar for 50 years.

Arguments over relatively trivial matters like sisters' veils and clerical collars interest what one hopes is a dwindling minority of people, but such discussions are usually engaged at the tip of a theological iceberg. Both the article and the bishop's decision to distribute it stem from the deeper question of the nature and purpose of the ordained priesthood and, even more fundamentally, the nature and purpose of ministry as such.

The article's author reported that he had asked the readers of his newsletter a simple, "unweighted" question: Do you want priests to wear Roman collars? He received 202 responses: 192 in favor of the collar, five against, and five who didn't care.

I'm not interested in the final tally. The survey was clearly unscientific, and its author never claimed it to be otherwise. What catches the attention are some of the reasons given in support of the collar. They reveal far more than the writers realized or intended.

"When priests dress like lay people, they act like lay people," one respondent wrote. How do lay people act? Is one supposed to infer from this comment that lay people are usually poor, or at least inferior, models of Christian behavior? Do we have here a throwback to the discredited pre-Vatican II notion that lay people are somehow second-class Christians, that the only *real* Christians are priests, nuns, monks and other celibates, marriage being a concession to weakness of the flesh?

"Keep the collar. It's about the only Catholic symbol we have left," another respondent wrote. That's even more disconcerting. What about the Eucharist, which Vatican II called the summit and the source of the whole of the Church's life? The baptismal font? The cross? The papacy?

More revealing still is this third response: "Priests, like doctors, are our reassurances. Both are emergency people. Both should wear identifying insignia." This comment speaks of bad theology and bad medicine, too. It's a totally outdated and uninformed idea that we

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should go to the doctor only in emergencies, when we can't stand the pain any longer or can't stop the bleeding. Preventative medicine isn't a liberal plot.

Where do we get this notion that priests are primarily for emergencies? Is presiding and preaching at the Eucharist an emergency situation? Is working with parish ministers and parish organizations on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis to carry out the mission of the Church an emergency matter?

That's a peculiar concept of ministry itself. But, then, many Catholics still don't look upon the priesthood as a ministry first and foremost. They still see it as a state in life invested with extraordinary supernatural and spiritual powers. Because the priest possesses these powers through ordination, he deserves special respect and privileges. In return, however, he must not — not ever — "act like lay people!"

Perhaps the most ambiguous reply came from a reader whom the Jesuit author describes, significantly, as "a fair young maiden." She wrote: "Priests look so handsome and distinguished in the Roman collar."

Our Jesuit friend, not content to let his readers carry the whole burden of the case on behalf of the Roman collar, contributed his own rationale to the mix. It isn't of a much higher order than those of his respondents.

He argues that "since we priests are fed, clothed, sheltered, bedded, health-cared for and put on wheels by the people of God, it behooves us to attend to their marked preference in the matter of our attire. Bluntly, if the laity who support us want this outward sign from us, then, by George, we ought comply."

That sounds more like the job description of a mistress than of a minister. And that's the point, by George!

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