

# Scholars say Vatican must listen to dissent

**By Laurie Hansen**  
Catholic News Service  
WASHINGTON — U.S. theologians and bishops had varied reactions and questions about a Vatican document that asked dissenting theologians to refrain from making a public issue of their disagreements with church teachings.

The instruction, issued June 26, said some forms of theological debate can help the church grow, but called on theologians who differ with church teachings to go to the magisterium with their disagreements rather than to the mass media.

Titled "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," the 28-page document was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith, and approved by Pope John Paul II. It was addressed primarily to the world's bishops and theologians.

Jesuit Father Ladislav M. Orsy, professor of canon law at The Catholic University of America, told Catholic News Service in a June 29 interview that by telling theologians they cannot disagree publicly, the Vatican is saying "all we can do is write a letter to a bishop or to Rome."

But "there are no official channels" through which to object to church teaching, he said. "It's not as if the bishops or the Vatican are bound to listen to you ... It's similar to saying a citizen may complain about conditions in the city, but there are no channels for you to go to. You go to talk

to the mayor or a city council member, but no one is bound to listen to you," he said.

He applauded the document for "giving importance to dialogue" and "freedom of inquiry," but took exception to what he saw as the writers' assumptions that "there are many theologians holding wild beliefs."

"This is not a document to encourage theologians who work responsibly," he said, but one that "condemns" those few who are part of the "lunatic fringe."

Auxiliary Bishop Richard J. Sklba of Milwaukee, a member of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, said in a June 30 interview he was pleased to see the document "doesn't presume that non-acceptance" of church teachings automatically means "dissent."

On the other hand, he said he wished the document had clearly defined dissent.

Bishop Sklba supported the document's stance that dissenting theologians not take their concerns to the mass media. He said the major limitation of the document was that it ignored one of the two aspects of the "theological endeavor."

Bishop Sklba said the instruction focused exclusively on the catechetical role of the theologian, ignoring the "pre-evangelization" role, in which the theologian "enters into dialogue with the larger culture."

"It doesn't at all consider the way in which the theologian has the mission to enter into dialogue with society, accepting new questions and exploring them in a tentative manner ... The instruction doesn't talk about the signs of the times," he said.

Jesuit Father Thomas Reese of the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington said June 28 that he was "not sure how relevant" the document was for

the United States.

"Here there is no major conflict between theologians and bishops," he said.

He cited theologians' involvement in the writing of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letters on war and peace and economic justice. In addition, numerous theologians are consultants to individual bishops and to bishops' committees, he said.

Father Reese said it was "naive to think that what theologians write about in journals isn't going into the public press."

He compared the situation to information published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* being picked up by *The New York Times*.

Father Charles E. Curran, a priest of the Rochester diocese and a moral theologian whom the Vatican has declared ineligible to teach Catholic theology, said it appeared to him the Vatican document showed a "reversion to a pre-Vatican II position."

Theology, said Father Curran, who is current president of the American Theological Society, "has to be done openly. It can't be done behind closed doors."

The Vatican document warns against setting up the individual conscience as a type of "supreme magisterium" for those who question church teachings.

"One has to follow one's conscience," said Father Curran, who has been named to the Goodwin-Philpott Eminent Scholar Chair of Religion at Auburn University in Auburn, Ala. "One's conscience might be wrong. Non-infallible church teaching might also be wrong. History has proven it has been in many cases," he said.

The church, he said, "needs faithful dissent. Sure, dissenters make mistakes. But if we don't have their voices, there's no one to bring up what we don't want to hear."

## Columnist laments 'more of the same' from Vatican

**By Father John S. Hayes**  
Freelance contributor

ELMIRA — Father Richard McBrien didn't spare Southern Tier audiences the barbs of criticism that alternately delight and enrage readers of his syndicated column.

Speaking at a press conference prior to the 10th annual dinner of the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry in Elmira June 29, the chairman of Notre Dame University's theology department reacted vigorously to the recently released Vatican "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian."

"This document on theologians does not surprise me," he said. "It follows along with other efforts in the same vein: oath of loyalty, profession of faith — just more of the same."

"We have nothing to fear from the media," he added, responding to the document's warning that dissenting theologians not turn to "mass media" to enlist public support for their positions. "I do not know of a single theologian who has taken his case to the media. It's the other way around."

During his keynote speech to an audience of nearly 200, Father McBrien termed Pope John Paul II a victim of his upbringing in Poland, where during his formative years, he knew the authoritarian force of Nazism and Communism. Although democracy continues to be a lightly known quantity in the Holy Father's point of view, Father McBrien concluded, his three encyclicals and solicitude for the poor during his worldwide travels illustrate great social concern. "Not too many hear him in Rome, though," the priest added.

Dressed as a modern theologian, in a dark suit, button-down shirt and tie, Father

McBrien responded with "set pieces" to questions about the latest Vatican instruction, which was issued June 26. "Vatican II was high-jacked by those who represented the minority at the Council," he said, quoting Father Gustave Weigel, SJ. "The minority was thumped at Vatican II. They are in caves but they will come out of their caves and they will own the mountain." Most of the curial officials today, Father McBrien added, never accepted the council.

Among his favorite contemporary American bishops, the priest mentioned, are the late Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit and Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco. He also cited Bishops Matthew H. Clark and Howard Hubbard of Albany for being open-minded, pastoral bishops.

Acknowledging that his syndicated column, "Essays in Theology" is now published in fewer than 20 newspapers across the country, Father McBrien said he is aware of the volume of criticism it draws. "That's why I write it," he said, laughing. "To make people think."

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