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Reining in dissent

Document draws praise, anger from theologians

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

One observer said the only people who like it are "lackeys."

But another commentator said, "I think it comes about 20 years too late."

"It" is the "Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," a document issued this June and signed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The instruction has raised eyebrows and tempers among liberal Catholic theologians in the United States and Europe, while earning praise and compliments from more conservative theologians and bishops.

What's the fuss all about? And why should the average lay Catholic care about another dispute between the Vatican and theologians?

One must examine the document's wording to understand why it is seen as a boon to conservatives who toe the line on church teaching and as a bust to liberals who question the Vatican on such issues as artificial birth control and abortion.

In brief, the instruction explains that a theologian's role is "to pursue in a particular way an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God ... He does this in communion with the magisterium (the church's teaching authority) which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of the faith."

Yet, the instruction warns, "(the theologian's) obligation to be critical, however, should not be identified with the critical spirit which is born of feeling or prejudice." Theologians must offer the faithful no teachings that do "harm to the doctrine of the faith."

In another section, the instruction states: "When the magisterium of the church makes an infallible pronouncement and solemnly declares that a teaching is found in revelation, the assent called for is that of theological faith ...

"When the magisterium proposes 'in a definitive way' truths concerning faith and morals, which, even if not divinely revealed, are nevertheless strictly and intimately connected with revelation, these must be firmly accepted and held," the instruction continues.

Although the document notes that "tensions may arise between the theologian and the magisterium," it charges theologians at odds with certain church teachings to "refrain from giving untimely public

expression to them."

Some theologians are giving public expression to their displeasure with that admonition because they see it as a repressive, censorious throwback to the pre-Vatican II church, in which they say Catholic theology played the subordinate role of merely transmitting the church's teachings.

"My general reaction is that it's a very unfortunate document," said Monsignor William H. Shannon, a retired Nazareth College religious studies professor who is currently chaplain at the Sisters of St.

Joseph Motherhouse in Rochester.

"(The instruction) comes at a time when there is an increased tension in the church, and I think it's a document that is going to heighten that tension because it seems to assume an adversarial relationship between theologians and the magisterium," Monsignor Shannon said. "Even though (the instruction)

talks about dialogue, it suggests no vehicle for dialogue."

Father Richard C. McBrien, syndicated columnist and chairman of Notre Dame University's theology department, also pointed out the document's implication that theologians are adversaries of the magisterium. He ridiculed the instruction's warning that theologians "should avoid turning to the 'mass media'" when objecting to a church teaching.

"It's treating theologians like they're bad boys ...," Father McBrien said, likening the situation to a family dispute. "If you have a problem with mommy or daddy, don't tell anyone outside the family."

That the instruction angers the likes of Father McBrien and others doesn't surprise Monsignor William B. Smith, professor of moral theology at St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, N.Y.

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"I would imagine that document drove (Father McBrien) up the wall," said Monsignor Smith, who said the instruction was obviously aimed at moral theologians who in recent years have questioned the church's teachings on such issues as artificial birth control, abortion, remarriage and euthanasia.

The monsignor acknowledged that such theologians have freedom of inquiry, but he said, "if you have a position of responsibility to teach church teaching, you have no right to do the opposite."

Theologians who dissent publicly "may think that's a sign of health," Monsignor Smith said. "I think it's a sign of disease."

Conservative theologians like Monsignor Smith view the instruction as a long-overdue attempt to rein in erroneous theological pronouncements that might harm the faithful. Dissenters often portray their views as an acceptable alternative to the magisterium, remarked Germain Grisez, professor of Christian ethics at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Md.

"In many cases, (dissenting theologians) tell the faithful

what is the official teaching of the church, but, 'Here's our view, you can follow it,'" he said.

Dissenting theologians and their supporters — especially those who appeal to surveys showing that many Catholics disagree with the church on certain issues — attempt to form a "counter-magisterium," according to Cardinal Ratzinger.

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