

Positive tone marks apostolic constitution

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, released on Sept. 25, has been greeted with a collective sigh of relief within Catholic academic circles. It's not the hard-line, repressive document that many had feared.

On the contrary, the apostolic constitution is positive and affirming in tone, rather than critical and admonitory. And, what is most important, it acknowledges the crucial difference between the ecclesiastically chartered Catholic universities of Europe and Latin America, on the one hand, and the civilly chartered Catholic universities of the United States, on the other.

But there are at least two potential problems with the document: (1) its suggestion that the academic freedom of Catholic theologians is uniquely limited; and (2) the active role it encourages bishops to take in the internal life of Catholic universities within their dioceses.

The document seeks to limit the academic freedom of theologians indirectly rather directly.

It does so by affirming that, while theologians should enjoy full academic freedom within Catholic universities alongside other scholars and teachers, such freedom is conditioned by the theologian's fidelity to the "principles and methods" of the discipline.

"Since theology seeks an understanding of revealed truth whose authentic interpretation is entrusted to the bishops of the Church," the apostolic constitution declares, "it is intrinsic to the principles and methods of their research and teaching in their academic discipline that theologians respect the authority of the bishops, and assent to Catholic doctrine according to the degree of authority with which it is taught (paragraph 29)."

An earlier Vatican document on the ecclesial vocation of Catholic theologians

made no allowance whatsoever for public disagreement with any official teaching of the church, in whole or in part.

Thus, if that earlier document were to be normative for interpreting the apostolic constitution, Catholic theologians would forfeit the protection of academic freedom in Catholic universities whenever they expressed disagreement with any official church teaching.

On the other hand, the apostolic constitution calls only for "respect" for the authority of the bishops and recognizes that official teachings have different degrees of authority. This latter point was a bone of contention in the dispute between the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Father Charles Curran.

Perhaps, therefore, the language of this document is sufficiently nuanced (or ambiguous) to allow for a benign interpretation.

A second potential problem with the new

apostolic constitution is the active role it accords a local bishop in the internal life of a Catholic university.

According to the constitution, even when local bishops do not enter into the internal governance of the university, they "should be seen not as external agents but as participants in the life of the Catholic university." What does that mean, precisely?

Later, in the General Norms section of the document, it is asserted that the local bishop has "the right and the duty to watch over the preservation and strengthening of their Catholic character."

"If problems should arise concerning this Catholic character," the apostolic constitution continues, "the local bishop is to take the initiatives necessary to resolve the matter, working with the competent university authorities in accordance with established procedures..."

A footnote indicates that such procedures in the case of independent Catholic univer-



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sities are "to be determined by Episcopal Conferences or other Assemblies of Catholic Hierarchy."

But, of course, no ecclesiastical body, including an episcopal conference, can establish procedures which are in violation of the statutes of the university in question or of civil law. Another loophole closed? A second potential problem removed?

No one can really say at this early stage. Somewhere down the road these two items could prove genuinely troublesome in dioceses with a doctrinally rigid and pastorally authoritarian bishop, on the one hand, and a weak university administration, on the other.

Those who have been forgiven will love greatly

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

I knew before we had even arrived at the home of Simon the Pharisee that we would be greeted by a servant. This was not the neighborhood of ordinary people. Simon was an important man with proper connections. He was certain to have a large household staff to serve him.

Simon had probably only invited Jesus to dinner this evening out of curiosity. The crowds that came to hear Jesus preach were growing steadily larger. Some people had even started saying that Jesus might be the Messiah.

"Wait here," said the servant who greeted us curly at Simon's door. "I'll have to check with my master. It was only Jesus who was invited here."

A few minutes later, the servant came in followed by Simon. "Ah, Jesus! At last we meet. I want you to sit with me at the head



of the table," Simon said as he quickly ushered him away. "You people are to sit down here," the servant told us. He pointed to the table that was the farthest away from the head table.

We had just finished dinner when we could hear a commotion by the entrance to the dining hall. The same servant who greeted us with such disdain was involved in an altercation.

"You shall allow me to pass!" a voice insisted. "I must see Jesus!" The voice had come from a woman who now pushed her way into the room. She was restrained by two servants who waited for Simon's direction.

Simon looked on with a wry expression. He glanced around the room at his other guests. Then he nodded to the two servants to release the woman.

I overheard someone at the table next to us say: "That woman has quite a reputa-

tion in town. If Jesus really is a prophet, then he will know she is a sinner and treat her accordingly."

There wasn't another sound in the banquet hall except for the woman's weeping as she knelt by Jesus washing his feet. When she had finished, she broke the seal on a jar of costly perfume and poured the entire contents over Jesus' feet.

Some of the people near us began to complain. "Never should have allowed this sort in here in the first place," they said. "She is a sinner. Jesus should throw her back into the street where she belongs. Give her a good thrashing. That's what she deserves for her vulgar behavior."

Jesus didn't do any of these things. Instead he turned to Simon and asked: "Two people owed a moneylender money. One's debt was \$500 and the other's was only \$50. Both were alike in that neither had the means to pay off their debt. Who do you suppose loved the moneylender more?"

Simon replied, "Why the one with the greater debt."

"You are correct," Jesus told a pleased Simon.

Then Jesus turned his attention to the woman who still knelt at his feet. "Simon, when I entered your house tonight, you didn't offer me any water to wash my feet. This woman has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

"Nor did you give me the customary kiss of greeting," Jesus continued. "She, on the other hand, has not stopped kissing my feet. I forgive her many sins because she has shown great love by her actions. He who has been forgiven little, loves little.


Everyone in the room began muttering, "Who does Jesus think he is? Only God can forgive sins!"

Scripture reference: Luke 7:36-50.

Meditation: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

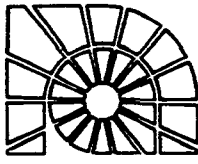
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