

Vatican is confusing the faithful

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In two closely related actions, the Vatican has managed somehow to offend bishops, biblical scholars, liturgists, religious educators, and women. And in the process it has "confused the faithful" — something it often accuses theologians of doing.

Just before the annual November meeting of the U.S. Catholic bishops in Washington, D.C., Cardinal William H. Keeler, archbishop of Baltimore and president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, confirmed that the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had withdrawn approval of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible for liturgical or catechetical use. The approval had previously been granted to the U.S. bishops by the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, after the bishops themselves had approved the NRSV for such uses by a vote of 195-24 at their annual meeting in Washington in November, 1991.

Archbishop Keeler also acknowledged a few weeks ago that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments had, in its turn, revoked its 1992 confirmation of the U.S. bishops' approval of the New American Bible (NAB) revised Psalter for liturgical use. In 1970 Pope Paul VI referred to the NAB as "a notable achievement."

What both translations (NRSV and



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NAB) have in common is a moderate use of gender-inclusive language. It was the same issue of inclusive language that helped scuttle the original English translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church two years ago.

Many bishops have been distressed and embarrassed by these recent Vatican actions because they represent a direct violation of the principle of collegiality and lend additional credence to the charge that, at bottom, the Vatican is insensitive to women.

Biblical scholars, speaking through the executive board of the Catholic Biblical Association (CBA), have characterized these recent Vatican actions as "demeaning" to the U.S. hierarchy and as a challenge to the church's credibility.

Are we to conclude, the CBA board asked, that our bishops "are not able to determine what is doctrinally sound and pastorally appropriate?"

But there was even more to the story. The scholars subsequently learned that Archbishop Keeler had actually received warning of these actions in a letter from the Vatican in June.

At first the archbishop discounted the significance of the letter, saying that there were "different interpretations" of what it meant. But after a copy of the letter began circulating among biblical scholars, it became apparent that it was indeed a clear directive against use of the NRSV and CBA Psalter in liturgy and catechesis.

The biblical scholars expressed surprise and disappointment that Archbishop Keeler failed to call the matter immediately to the attention of his fellow bishops, biblical scholars, and liturgists and to seek their advice about an appropriate response. Instead, he set the letter aside, only to have the controversy erupt in more virulent form just a few months later.

Although not usually drawn into church controversies, liturgists, too, have been energized by these recent Vatican actions. In their minds, years of consultation and careful preparation have suddenly gone for naught.

The situation may be even worse in Canada. The Publications Service of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops holds the world rights to NRSV-based lectionaries, on sale in several countries since 1992. The

missalette industry has also been thrown into confusion.

The episcopal chairman of the Canadian bishops' Liturgy Commission offered a comment to the effect that "once the text is approved, the text is approved." He also cited the widespread support for the new texts by the Catholic faithful themselves.

And if liturgists and publishers of liturgical books are disturbed, so, too, are religious educators and catechists and publishers of educational and catechetical materials.

But perhaps no constituency feels more offended than Catholic women, who have endured this year alone a deliberately gender-exclusive translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a strong papal letter rejecting the possibility of women's ordination and even the right to discuss it, and now the rejection of moderately inclusive translations of the Bible for liturgical and catechetical use.

If someone in the Vatican had on New Year's Day secretly forged a plan to alienate as many Catholic leaders and as many Catholic women as possible, and then to sow confusion in the minds of the faithful (including even some bishops) about who has real authority in the church and whose authority is only apparent, how would that plan have differed from the actual sequence of events?

Surely no one in the Vatican set out to do all this on purpose. But should that make us all feel better about what happened?

Guilty feelings are not not always sure guides

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

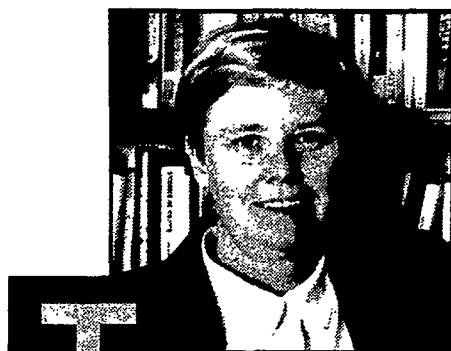
The new catechism includes a section on conscience, which contains many fine aspects. In one key sentence the authors state simply: "Conscience is a judgment of reason."

This phrase states something so obvious that we might overlook it. But it makes a very important point. It reminds us that our judgments about concrete actions are to be made through a careful thought process.

For many of us, this means we have to work a bit to make sure we are not confusing feelings of guilt or self-approval originating from outside ourselves with judgments of conscience.

We know that in the process of maturing we develop a sense of good and bad from the praise or blame we receive from others. As young children, we learned that "good" is what pleases our parents. "Bad" is what displeases them.

As we grew older, we brought inside ourselves some of our parents' judgments (and the judgments of others whose opinions we came to value) about standards of behavior. Thus, the sense of praise and blame we perceive coming from others becomes part of the self-approval we develop.



THE MORAL LIFE

Even as adults we get much of our sense of self-worth and the value of our actions from others' opinions.

This process involves concrete feelings within us. It takes place almost as an automatic response and happens whether we choose it or not. It is not, I think, what the catechism means by "a judgment of reason."

Today we recognize that all our judgments are the result of a complex mix of thoughts, feelings, biases, knowledge and a blend of reasoning processes. We know that we can nev-

er completely separate our thoughts from our feelings.

But the statement in the new catechism is an important one nevertheless. In reminding us that judgments of conscience are judgments of reason, the catechism urges us to move beyond confusing our automatic feelings of guilt and self-approval with true judgments of conscience. The statement reminds us that our automatic responses and feelings of guilt are not always reliable guides to the moral life.

I think most adult Catholics would admit that we sometimes feel guilty about things that are not immoral. Sometimes, inner feelings of guilt make excessive demands on us and cause us to restrict behavior in irrational ways. Not too long ago I spoke with a woman who was suffering greatly from a sense of guilt about having someone care for her children while she worked outside her home. This woman felt she was falling short of an ideal of "the good mother."

In spite of her feelings of guilt about failing to live up to this ideal, I think a judgment of reason would verify that this woman had provided very well for the care and nurturing of her children. Her judgments about the need to hold a job outside the home seemed sound. The discipline she exercises in fulfill-

ing the responsibilities of her job along with those of caring for a home appear admirable. And the love she brings to her children, her husband, and the whole of their family life seems to be nothing short of a blessing for everyone.

This woman will probably continue to struggle between her feelings of guilt and her judgment of reason regarding the arrangements in her family. Most of us, as adults, struggle with a sense of guilt about many things. But the catechism asks us to recall that feelings of guilt are not always the best guides available as we form our lives and actions. Sometimes, we place excessive demands on ourselves because of feelings of guilt. At other times we fail to feel guilty about aspects of our behavior that actually need to change.

A person whose actions are controlled by feelings of guilt or self-approval — and not by a personal appreciation of what is right and wrong — has not yet assumed full responsibility for his or her life. The simple phrase from the new catechism invites us to continue the hard work of moving beyond the sometimes simplistic and unsophisticated responses we learned in childhood to more responsible, reasonable judgments characteristic of Catholic adulthood.

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