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## Pope

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dissent against some decrees.

"We always have to look in the broader context of loyalty to God and to the total church, and then loyalty to the pope," said Father Curran, who currently teaches Christian ethics at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

### Infallibility has limits

Father Joseph Hart, associate professor of systematic theology at St. Bernard's Institute in Rochester, noted that doctrine of papal infallibility was formulated at the First Vatican Council. However, he added, "It's a far cry from there to say that every word of the pope is infallible."

Father Curran said that infallible teachings are "a matter of faith, absolute and certain," but that noninfallible papal statements are open to debate.

Father Curran added that he doesn't believe bishops or religious scholars alone have a special right to debate papal teachings among themselves.

"I don't think that makes any sense. These are issues that by definition have to be public, have to be talked about," Father Curran commented. "It's just impossible to do anything privately in this world, even in a world of theologians."

Father Curran first gained national prominence by disagreeing with some of the noninfallible teachings of *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical in which Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the church's long-standing prohibition of the use of artificial birth control.

Father Curran has also stated that under certain limited circumstances, actions condemned by the church — among them abortion, homosexual acts, divorce and premarital sex — can be considered moral.

In the area of homosexuality, for example, Father Curran explained to the *Courier* that "if it's a committed relationship striving toward permanency between two constitutionally gay people, it seems to me that within that context you can justify homosexual acts."

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986 declared Father Curran unfit to teach theology at a Catholic institution. He was consequently suspended from the theology department at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

A more recent case involving Vatican censures of a priest occurred when the same congregation excommunicated Oblate Father Tissa Balasuriya of Sri Lanka in January 1997. The Vatican declared that Father Balasuriya's portrayal of the Virgin Mary in his book *Mary and Human Liberation* was contrary to church teaching.

Theologian May, who taught religious studies at Catholic University during Father Curran's tenure, supported the Vatican censures against both his former colleague and Father Balasuriya for what he considered to be extreme viewpoints.

"Legitimate questions can arise, but questioning something is quite different than declaring it false," said May, who currently teaches at the John Paul II Center for Studies of Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C.

### Vatican remains silent

Bishop Clark, who has led the Rochester Diocese since 1979, has never been disciplined in any way. Yet he acknowledged that petitions have been sent to the Vatican requesting disciplinary measures against him. For instance, he recalled that a group sought "to have me removed from office" during the diocesan school reorganization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when several schools were closed.

"I get so frustrated. What makes (my critics) arbiters of my obedience to the Holy Father?" he said. "It would seem that if I am disobedient he'll let me know that, or the pro-nuncio will."

In the past year, along with the March 1 Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral for homosexual Catholics, Bishop Clark has provoked criticism for his support of Call to Action. The Chicago-based organization seeks the opening of the priesthood to married men and to women, more involvement of lay people in making deci-

sions in the church, and changes in church doctrine and discipline in such areas as artificial contraception and homosexuality.

Suprenaut maintained that Call to Action, along with other groups who petition the pope to overturn church teachings, are wasting their energy.

"Catholics for a Free Choice are not going to get the church to say abortion is okay. The Women's Ordination Conference is not going to get the church to ordain women priests. And the Society of Pius X isn't going to get the church to say Vatican II was a mistake," Suprenaut said.

Meanwhile, Bishop Clark wondered if those who promote absolute obedience to the pope are consistent in their stances. For example, he said that some of his detractors apparently disagree with Pope John Paul II's statements denouncing materialism and the death penalty.

"I must confess to you, among the people who apply the papal text to every detail of life in as full a sense as I would look for, rather all too often these people have particular interests and select papal teachings that would support those interests," Bishop Clark said.

Father Hart noted that some of the present-day adherence to complete papal authority stems from a 19th-century movement known as Ultramontanism. He explained that Catholics were in search of uniformity during the post-French Revolution restoration period.

"The idea was to have one absolute emperor, a thought which still pervades a lot of Catholicism," Father Hart said.

This line of thinking, he added, submits to the notion that "when the pope thinks, speaks and acts, it's God who's thinking, speaking and acting within him — and to not go along with him is to disobey God."

"That's the first time in church history that you had that extreme a thought," Father Hart said.

Bishop Clark disagreed with that way of viewing the pope.

"Very often, to me, that way of looking at the papacy is a very limited one," Bishop Clark said. "It places it right there at the fringes of something unreal or surre-

al," he said.

### History offers cautions

Father Hart pointed out that heretical popes have been a part of church history, and therefore "it is risky when you place everything in the hands of one man."

"There are popes who were murderers, or raised a family while they were pope," Father Hart said. For example, he said, Alexander VI (1492-1503) ordered the murder of a Florentine friar Girolamo Savonarola in 1498. In addition, he noted, Alexander VI and Paul III (1534-49) sired children while in office.

Suprenaut, while declaring that "anyone who is Catholic should say that whoever is the successor of John Paul II is also the successor of Peter," admitted that the election of an uncorrupt pope is not a given.

"We've been very blessed in this century to have a string of popes who have been known to be very holy, well-liked by the faithful and who seem to manifest in their lives the authenticity of what they teach. But it may not always be that way," Suprenaut said.

Yet despite the possibility of a corrupt pope, and the movement toward greater lay involvement in the church, May stressed that we do not have license to challenge the current pope's — or any other pope's — viewpoints.

"The word 'dissent' did not appear on any Vatican II documents," May said, implying that the Second Vatican Council did not affirm dissent as an option.

"A prudent and wise person gets advice from someone he trusts. I think a good Catholic would trust what the church itself teaches," May added. "It's not blind obedience — it's faithful obedience."

Meanwhile, Bishop Clark espoused similar reverence for papal authority — but also encouraged greater latitude for individual discernment.

"It's a respectful, open-hearted, receptive review of all that (the pope) would like to bring to our attention," Bishop Clark said. "We should then put into practice whatever he would like to convey to us, relative to concrete circumstances and current and past teachings."

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