

The Vatican has righted a wrong done last year when it excommunicated the 71-year-old Sri Lankan theologian and Oblate Father Tissa Balasuriya. Father Balasuriya was restored to full communion with the Catholic Church on Jan. 15. One can only rejoice over this remarkable gesture of reconciliation.

The original grounds for excommunication, according to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, were that Father Balasuriya did "not recognize the supernatural, unique character of the revelation of Jesus Christ," that he was "at the point of denying ... the Marian dogmas" of the Immaculate Conception, the virgin birth, and the Assumption, and that he denied "the necessity of baptism" as well as "the dogma of original sin."

In addition, the Vatican claimed that he also did "not recognize the existence of an infallibility of the Roman pontiff and of the college of bishops 'cum and sub Petro' with and under Peter'."

Father Balasuriya maintained at the time that the charges against him were "incorrect" in relation to what he had actually written in his book, *Mary and Human Liberation*. He insisted that everything therein was "within the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy" and complained that there had been "no meaningful dialogue or objective inquiry into these issues."

The theologian was excommunicated



## essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

when he refused to sign an oath of faith written specifically for him by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He objected to the Congregation's formulation and signed instead the 1968 profession of faith (known as the "Credo of the People of God") of Pope Paul VI.

Father Balasuriya, however, added wording to his profession in which he explained that he accepted the Credo of Paul VI "in the context of theological development and church practice since Vatican II and the freedom and responsibility of Christians and theological searching under canon law." Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the doctrinal congregation, told reporters last January that the Vatican would have accepted the Credo of Paul VI in lieu of its own statement had Father Balasuriya not added his own words to it. Those words, the cardinal insisted, had rendered the declaration "defective."

The excommunication had very nega-

tive pastoral effects all over the world, especially within religious communities and the community of Catholic scholars. Commentators wondered why the extreme penalty of excommunication (equivalent to spiritual capital punishment) was imposed on a relatively obscure Third World theologian, a man who had been a thoroughly faithful and committed religious for over half a century.

Perhaps the Vatican itself realized it may have gone too far, or at least picked the wrong target. In any case, behind-the-scenes efforts were initiated, involving the Vatican, the Oblates, and, it is said, a German theologian respected by all parties, including Cardinal Ratzinger, to bring an acceptable resolution to this unfortunate and unnecessary crisis.

As in the case of all compromises, Father Balasuriya himself had to make at least three concessions. First, he did not add the wording he had appended to the Credo of Paul VI last January. Second, he agreed to submit his theological writings for review and approval to his diocesan and religious superiors before publishing them. And, third, he promised "to abstain from any declaration that is contradiction to this reconciliation."

On the other hand, Father Balasuriya was not required in the statement of reconciliation to admit any error in his writings. He acknowledged that "serious ambiguities and doctrinal errors were

perceived" in his writings "and therefore provoked negative reactions from other parties, affected relationships and led to an unfortunate polarization in the ecclesial community." He expressed "regret" for "the harm this has caused."

Moreover, even as he recognized the rights and duties of the hierarchical magisterium to evaluate the work of theologians, he was allowed to note in the statement that he had been "expecting a more open dialogue for an objective scrutiny of my book."

He also pointed out that, while he assumed that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had intervened "according to its regulations" and was aware that "many letters were exchanged through the mediation of my superior general," he nonetheless had been "hoping for a more direct and personal dialogue" with the Vatican.

It seems obvious from all reports that, were it not for the very high regard in which Father Balasuriya is held by his fellow Oblates, there would not have been such a great impetus for this reconciliation.

A mistake was made. What is important is that the mistake has now been corrected. Truth and justice have been served.

And so has the church.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Compassion must be balanced with doctrine

What is the right relationship between doctrine and compassion — between truth-telling and pastoral practice?

The question may seem better suited for a graduate theology seminar than a column. But it is precisely the issue posed by several of the most agitated questions in the Catholic Church today, such as the reception of Communion by the divorced-and-remarried. The issue was also raised (in a particularly sharp way) by "Always Our Children," the October 1997 pastoral message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family to parents of youngsters experiencing homosexual temptations.

Writing in *Pro Ecclesia*, Lutheran moral theologian Gilbert Meilaender had some things to say about all this. The occasion for his essay was the church's public stance toward homosexuality. But his conclusion reaches beyond this case to the broader question of doctrine and compassion:

"... We dare not permit the church's public teaching, on the matter of homosexuality or any other matter, to be taken over and determined by a desire — however sincere and well-intentioned — to 'affirm' every person in whatever state he or



## the catholic difference

BY GEORGE WEIGEL

she may be. That is not the Gospel.

"To articulate the Christian norm for life is not the church's only task, but it is a necessary task. If we fail here, affirmation of and compassion for those who fall short means little. Indeed, once we can no longer say what it means to 'fall short,' we have little need for compassion and few problems for pastoral practice.

"But then we also are poorly positioned to take seriously the law written into our hearts, the desire of human beings for what is noble and God-pleasing, the good news that we have been set free from captivity to our own distorted images of what it means to be satisfied and fulfilled.

"For the sake not only of those who have

been baptized into Christ's body, but also for the sake of a world which, even if inchoately, wants to follow the way of life, we have a responsibility to conform our public teaching to what we have ourselves been taught by Scripture about our creation as male and female and about marriage as the first of institutions. We have no authorization to do otherwise."

According to the conventional media categories, there are "liberal" and "conservative" Christians, the former moved by compassion and the latter fixated on doctrine. Meilaender demonstrates this taxonomy just won't do. Christians are a people who "have been taught." By whom? By the Lord, in Scripture (and, a Catholic would add, in tradition).

Taught what? The truth of the human condition, as revealed in the Hebrew Bible and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that truth yields a "norm of life": a rule, not in the sense of an infinite series of do's and don'ts, but of a given, changeless standard that measures us and the degree to which we have been faithful to what we have been taught by grace.

There is nothing "liberal" or "conservative" about the insistence that there is a

"rule of faith" in Christianity. And as Meilaender suggests, that rule is not an obstacle to compassion; rather, it is the very condition for the possibility of true compassion. For "compassion" means to "suffer with," and if anything goes, what's the suffering to be shared and commonly borne? It certainly isn't the suffering involved in knowing our failure and seeking reconciliation with God.

In a 1993 discussion of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, a venerable moral theologian argued that to love was "to affirm the other as he understands himself to be." Another theologian replied, "And if he is mistaken in his understanding? What are my obligations in love to him then?" There was no answer.

There couldn't be. "Affirming others as they understand themselves to be" is not a Christian tenet. It's a tenet of the therapeutic society, in which there is neither rule of faith nor rule of life. Emptying the Gospel of its power is not a matter of compassion. It is an act of infidelity, from which no one's healing is likely to ensue.

Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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