

Dissent document likely to have little effect

Three weeks ago the Vatican released two important documents on dissent in the church. Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ad tuendam fidem* ("For the defense of the faith") adds to the Profession of Faith adhered to by bishops, theologians and others who teach in the name of the church, and amends the Code of Canon Law to include theological dissent from "definitive" but non-infallible teachings under the heading of actions deserving of punishment by a "just penalty." The apostolic letter was accompanied by a commentary by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

What is significant about both documents is the manner in which they collapse the traditional distinction between infallible and non-infallible teachings. For the past century, the term "infallible" has applied only to those teachings formally declared by a pope or an ecumenical council to be divinely revealed and thus part of the "deposit of faith." Such teachings were also called "definitive." Lately, the Vatican has broadened the term "definitive" to include non-infallible teachings as well.

This was evident in John Paul II's 1994 letter on the ordination of women and in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), and in the Roman Curia's various directives to theologians and confessors. The pope and Cardinal Ratzinger seem to regard



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

non-infallible but "definitive" teachings as if they, too, were infallible, even if they "are not able to be declared as divinely revealed" (Cardinal Ratzinger).

The papal letter incorporates this new approach into the Code of Canon Law and the Profession of Faith. A second section has been added to Canon 750 placing "definitive" but non-infallible teachings on a par with infallible teachings.

Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary goes well beyond the papal letter. He asserts that theologians (and Catholics generally) would "no longer be in full communion with the Catholic Church" if they fail to give "firm and definitive assent" to these "definitive" but non-infallible teachings. These are truths, he writes, that are "necessarily connected with revelation," either historically or logically. Even if they are not divinely revealed, he insists, this "in no way dimin-

ishes their definitive character."

Cardinal Ratzinger provides specific examples, among them the restriction of priestly ordination to men, the illicitness of euthanasia, and the declaration of Pope Leo XIII in 1896 that Anglican ordinations are invalid.

The last example is astonishingly insensitive and provocative, coming less than three weeks before the opening of the Lambeth Conference, a meeting of every Anglican bishop from around the world, held every 10 years in Canterbury. What is equally astonishing is that the cardinal-archbishop of Westminster, Basil Hume, whose diocese is located at the very center of the Anglican Communion, was caught by complete surprise. He had no advance warning, much less input. Not even Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was informed until just a few hours before its release.

Were the terms of Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary enforced, theologians who question the prohibition of women's ordination or the decision on Anglican orders would be subject to "a just penalty" and would even risk breaking communion with the Catholic Church itself. Such an outcome would be in marked contrast to the approach taken by an earlier pope, John XXIII, who told the bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council in 1962 that, while the

church in the past condemned errors "with the greatest severity," it prefers now "to make use of the medicine of mercy" and to demonstrate the validity of its teachings rather than attempt to enforce them under threat of punishment by a "just penalty."

What are the probable short- and long-term effects of all this? Short-term, canonists are likely to be unhappy with the pope's unilateral amending of the Code of Canon Law so soon (15 years) after major revisions of the 1917 Code had been completed. Theologians will also be distressed by this latest evidence of the lack of respect and even hostility the Vatican seems to bear toward them.

Some bishops may be pressured by ultra-conservative Catholics to use this new canonical authority to secure for them a few prominent theological scalps. But even conservative bishops are wise enough to know that the church cannot afford an open war between the hierarchy, on the one side, and theologians and the Catholic intellectual community, on the other.

Long-term, this development is likely to have little or no effect. The next pontificate will not necessarily be bound by it. That's the nature of the papacy. It has almost unlimited power to do whatever it wishes, short of promoting heresy itself.

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

A vocation grows out of desire and talents

Q. I have been reading your columns in our Catholic paper for about a year and just attended Mass for the first time in 30 years. I didn't even cry when my father died, but I cried now.

You might like to know you reach all the way to the Chillicothe (Ohio) Correctional Institution, and you have helped me put things into perspective.

This is my 14th year in prison, and I read my New International Version Bible faithfully. Is this a good Bible to use? Or is there a Catholic Bible that would be better?

(Ohio)

A. Thank you for your thoughtful letter. The New International Version of the Bible is an excellent and readable translation.

The best and most authentic English translation under Catholic auspices, in my opinion, is the St. Joseph edition of the New American Bible, with the revised New Testament and Psalms.

Published with the approval of the bishops of the United States, this edition contains much explanatory material —



question corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

church documents, Catholic approaches to interpretation and so on — that helps make the Scriptures much more spiritually fruitful for most of us average readers.

I will make sure you or your library receives a copy.

Q. I am a 79-year-old who has been troubled for years with a nagging fear that I turned away from a call to the religious life.

One of my senior-year teachers, a nun, asked me "What are you going to do next year?"

I said I was going to work. Our conversation was brief, but I knew what she was asking.

I have never married, but have followed a fulfilling career and have helped a lot of people.

But I wonder if I had a vocation, even though I never desired it. As I approach the end, I worry what God will say about this.

I've never discussed it with a priest, but I'd like to know your advice or consolation, if any.

(Texas)

A. God's call to us, the "vocation" he offers, is almost always in the context of the talents we were given, the abilities of body, mind and heart with which we have been blessed.

Very rarely can one say, without some special insight or inspiration, I don't want or fit this kind of life, but I think that's my vocation.

A genuine vocation is to something we want to do, a life that attracts us, a way of giving ourselves happily and joyfully to other people. In a sense we can't see our-

selves living without it.

Regardless of what the sister said, the religious life obviously was not something you felt called to then or now. The fact that we might have had other worthwhile lives does not diminish the value of the one we have.

If I had another three or four lives, I could see myself doing several other careers happily and, I think, well. Given one life, however, I wouldn't trade with anyone, and I'm grateful for it.

If I have any advice it is be grateful for the life that has been yours through the years; you have done the best you can, which is all we are asked. I am certain God accepts this as the vocation he wished for you.

(A free brochure, in English or Spanish, answering questions Catholics ask about baptism practices and sponsors is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Father John Dietzen, Box 325, Peoria, IL 61651.

(Questions for this column should be sent to Father Dietzen at the same address.)

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