



Living a Catholic Life No. 11 *Moral Dissent*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between Knights of Columbus councils, parishes, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

Perhaps no theme has so characterized moral theology in the United States since the Second Vatican Council than *dissent*. Nowhere was this theme more prevalent than in the area of sexual morality, beginning in the mid-1960’s with the popularized dissent of Fr. Charles Curran. In the beginning, Curran’s dissent was limited to the topics of masturbation and contraception. Over the next twenty years, it gradually spread to include such topics as premarital sex, divorce and remarriage, abortion, sterilization, homosexuality, and in vitro fertilization. He developed a popularized “theology of dissent,” which was clear and concise enough to catch the interest of the secular press and work its way into the understanding of the average well-educated Catholic.

Curran maintained that his theology of dissent was within the bounds of the manualist tradition, which, in rare and well-defined instances, permitted theologians to question certain teachings of the Magisterium. There has always been a healthy and creative tension between the Magisterium and the theological world. However, the theology of dissent had several novel dimensions: the use of the mass media to advocate for the attitude of dissent from any teaching that is not infallible, the extension of private “suspension of assent” to “public dissent,” the extension of the right of “suspension of assent” from the trained theologian to any of the faithful, and the extension of the theologian’s mission to include giving concrete pastoral norms in contradiction to the Magisterium if deemed by the theologian to be in error.

In the end, the theology of dissent holds that either a doctrine is defined infallibly or not. If it is not defined, it is not certain. If it is not certain, then it admits of doubt. If it admits of doubt, then it is susceptible to error. If it is susceptible to error, then the Church cannot demand assent. If she cannot demand assent, then the faithful have a right to dissent.

From various magisterial documents and actions taken by Roman congregations, we can present the position of the Holy See on dissent:

1. Religious submission of mind and will is due to the teaching of the Magisterium on matters of faith and morals, even when it is expressed in a non-solemn manner. This “religious submission” is due not primarily because of the arguments presented, but rather as a result of the authority conferred on the Magisterium by the Lord. There is no difference between the theologian and the common faithful in rendering this religious submission or adopting an attitude of “receptivity.”

2. The assent which is due a teaching is given to the degree that the Magisterium engages her authority. If she tentatively

teaches a point, then all that is demanded of the faithful is tentative assent. At times the Holy See or individual bishops are called upon to make prudential judgements on particular issues. While the full weight of the Magisterium’s authority is not engaged, individuals should abide by such a prudential judgement.

3. This predisposition toward receptivity does not, however, presume an uncritical or unscholarly attitude. Rather, it is based upon a previous act of faith (critically examined and freely made) whereby the theologian affirms his belief that the Magisterium, both ordinary and solemn, is guided by the Spirit in a way he is not. If he does not accept the teaching of the Magisterium on a particular point, his first instinct is to reexamine his own position in an attempt to bring himself to the condition of *assent*. This attitude is not one of “blind acceptance,” but it is within the context of a serious quest for *assent* rather than *dissent*.

4. It is certainly within the prerogative of the theologian to *publicly* ask the Magisterium *any question* which he deems necessary for the clarification of the teaching. The theologian must also respect the Magisterium’s prerogative *not to answer immediately*. He must also avoid the attitude of making himself the “norm of satisfaction.” At certain times, the Magisterium may deem it necessary, for the good of the Church, to “close discussion” on a certain topic for the reflections to continue in a less combative atmosphere that will no longer disturb the peace of the Church. During this period, the theologian will not *publicly* persist in calling the teaching into question by his lectures and articles.

5. If, after *serious and sustained efforts*, the theologian finds himself unable *at this time* to render assent honestly, he may *for the time being* suspend his assent while he continues his quest for understanding. Though he can and often should share these difficulties with other theologians and the Magisterium, he has no right or duty to inform the faithful of his difficulties. Thus, he has *no right as a theologian to publicly dissent from the teaching of the Magisterium*, be it ordinary or solemn.

6. If he is convinced that the error of the Magisterium is of such serious magnitude that silence violates his conscience, then he must likewise reexamine his previously held belief that the Spirit assists the Magisterium in a way in which he is not assisted.

7. It may happen, in a rare instance, that the Church substantially adjusts her teaching in light of the questions posed by theologians. But the adjustment, if and when it comes, must be the result of their faith in the ultimate guidance of the Magisterium by the Holy Spirit, rather than trust in their own role of “authentic teacher” of “safe teaching.”

This column was adapted from Steven P. Rohlf, “The Magisterium and Dissent,”

Ethics & Medics 19.5 (May 1994). For more information on this topic, please visit www.ncbcenter.org.