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*A bishop teaches what he authorizes others to teach,  
and the Church in practice teaches what the  
bishops knowingly permit to be taught with their authority.*

## Charity and dissenting theologians

*By Germain Grisez*

■ The Archdiocese of Washington sponsored a workshop on Principles of Catholic Moral Life at the Catholic University of America, June 17-21, 1979. The purpose of the workshop was to answer challenges to Catholic moral thinking for the benefit of pastors and teachers who must struggle constantly with the impact of recent developments upon the faithful.

Fifteen scholars from Europe and America gave papers. Among the Europeans were Fr. Louis Bouyer of the Oratory from Paris and Dr. John M. Finnis from Oxford University. Among the Americans were Fr. William Smith of the seminary of the Archdiocese of New York, Fr. Donald McCarthy of the seminary of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Dr. William E. May and Fr. Ronald Lawler, O.F.M.Cap., of the Catholic University of America,

and Prof. Frederick S. Carney, a leading Protestant moralist at Southern Methodist University.

The well-known group of theologians who dissent from Catholic moral teaching was not represented on the program. Since their views have dominated the media — not only the popular but also the professional theological media — during the past decade, it hardly seemed necessary to include yet another statement of the opinions which the workshop was intended to answer.

Cardinal William Baum, Archbishop of Washington, gave the opening address on the “Distinctiveness of Christian Morality.” This address was primarily an affirmation of the indissoluble bond in Christian morality between natural law and man’s supernatural vocation. The Cardinal stressed

the centering of morality upon Christ and the Eucharist. Against dissenters from the teaching of the magisterium (especially in sexual morality), Cardinal Baum affirmed that it is sacramentalism, not "physicalism," which the Church teaches. He also insisted on a point which the Vatican declaration *Persona Humana* made against so-called "fundamental-option theory": Mortal sin "is to be found in the opposition to authentic love which is included in every deliberate transgression, in serious matter, of each of the moral laws. . . ."

### **Moral principles defended**

Speaker after speaker in the workshop took his cue from Cardinal Baum in articulating the Church's teaching — often with fresh insights pointing toward possible areas of authentic development — and at the same time in criticizing various aspects of the moral theology of the dissenters. Taken together, the papers presented in the workshop made up an impressive defense of Catholic moral principles against questionable recent developments. It is hoped that a volume including all of the papers will be published soon.

My own contribution to the workshop was a paper on consequentialism and Christian morality. My presentation elicited a reaction which I will discuss in the remainder of this article, and so I briefly summarize what I said.

Consequentialism is the theory that the end justifies the means, that one may do evil to achieve good when the proportion between good and evil is "right." I criticized this theory as ultimately unintelligible and explained its

continuing appeal by its service as a method of rationalization. Most of the theologians who dissent from received Catholic moral teaching have adopted consequentialism, despite the fact that even most secular philosophers agree that there are many important objections against this approach which have never been answered.

I argued that there is a good deal of room for licit theological dissent provided that one dissents from a particular point of the Church's teaching — one not proposed as definitive — on the basis of principles and a method which are themselves drawn from faith and consonant with all of the central teachings of faith. But consequentialism contradicts a point of Catholic teaching which belongs to Christian faith, for Christians always have rejected the view that evil may be done to achieve good (cf. Rom. 3:8), and always have held that some acts — including apostasy, adultery, and killing the innocent — may never be done *regardless of consequences*.

### **Bishops should speak out**

It follows, I argued, that the theologians who have adopted consequentialism are subjecting the Church's faith and moral teaching to criticism by an extrinsic principle which is incompatible with Christian faith. If this conclusion is true, it seems to me that a practical conclusion follows: The bishops ought not to condone this dissent, and should make clear that theologians and teachers who adopt consequentialism teach and speak without authorization from the bishops, and therefore not as *Catholic* theologians and teachers. It is unacceptable that a

position which is incompatible with Christian faith be regarded as if it were a legitimate theological opinion.

Not surprisingly, my remarks elicited a negative reaction from a few persons present. The negative reaction was not from Cardinal Baum nor any other bishop present, nor did it seem to be shared by many of the priests and teachers who had come to the workshop hoping for help in their struggle with the impact of theological dissent upon the faithful. Rather, the negative reaction mainly was from a few persons who perhaps do not personally share the opinions of the dissenting theologians, but who are determined to defend the use of consequentialism as if this were a legitimate theological option. For this reason, the negative reaction seemed to be not to my theoretical criticism of consequentialism so much as to the practical conclusion I drew concerning the way the Church ought to regard theologians who adopt this theory and use it to criticize received Catholic moral teaching.

Those who reacted negatively assume the legitimacy of the use of consequentialism in Catholic moral theology; for them, the theologians who have adopted it are simply one school in the rich pluralism which properly exists in the Church. I was questioning this assumption. Understandably, they considered my argument and conclusion to be dangerously divisive. On their assumption, my view seems uncharitable. And so they made clear in various indirect ways that they considered my presentation uncharitable.

In many ways, a charge that one is uncharitable is unanswerable. Even if I find nothing on my conscience, this



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does not mean I am justified. And usually I do find *something* on my conscience. I know well enough that when I criticize the theologians who have adopted consequentialism my tone is not perfectly disinterested, perfectly expressive of the love of God, as the tone of Jesus is. I realize that I must not judge others, nor do I mean to condemn those whom I believe dissent illicitly. Doubtless they believe they act rightly. But at times I find it hard to keep this important point in mind.

And so the criticism led me to think once more about a question which always is important and which probably

is more important now than ever: How is one to be charitable when faced with dissenting theologians? Since many readers of this review must often find it necessary to withstand erroneous theological opinions, they may find my thoughts of some interest.

There certainly are several ways of acting which truly are uncharitable and divisive. Acting in these ways disrupts rather than builds up the life and work of the Church.

#### **Uncharitableness shows out**

First, it is uncharitable to withdraw into a closed circle of like-thinking people. One must be sensitive to the criticisms of others, must try to think such criticisms through, and must be ready to make adjustments in one's thought and action if such adjustments are necessary for progress in Christian truth and life. To evade debate and discussion, to ignore objections against one's views, and to foster the impression that those who disagree are an insignificant minority — such maneuvers by either side hardly manifest good will.

Second, it is uncharitable to assume the worst whenever anyone says or does something with which one does not agree. One must avoid rigid integralism and must realize that there is a place for differences about nonessentials.

Third, it is uncharitable to be personally vindictive. One who loves the truth of faith necessarily hates what appear to be denials of it and serious errors against it. At the emotional level, it is hardly possible entirely to separate one's feelings toward errors from one's feelings toward those who

make errors. But one should try hard to avoid gratuitous nastiness. One must work to heal divisions, not welcome them.

Fourth, it is uncharitable to subordinate the principle of the authority of the Church's teaching to the merely subjective principle of one's own opinions or to the no less subjective principle of the "consensus of theologians" who belong to the same circle as oneself. The adoption of any such subjective principle as superior to the authority of the Church's teaching puts one on a short road to heresy. Moreover, such an attitude is no less destructive of the unity of the Church if it is adopted in the name of pastoral concern for the faithful.

#### **Other ways show truth**

Fifth, even worse than heresy is radical uncharitableness toward one's enemies. To wish others damned or — what amounts to the same — to believe them so and to be glad of it is the worst sin against Christian charity. One is not easily tempted to commit so grave a sin. Perhaps more common is the temptation to regard as useless the patient work of charity, which always forgives, seeks to remedy, and willingly endures resistance and even violent rejection. When one is convinced that one's opponents are doing what is wrong, one should hope that they are sincere and that God, who reads hearts, will find their hearts pure or, if he does not, will make them so.

In contrast with ways of acting which really are uncharitable, there are other ways of acting which sometimes appear uncharitable but really are ways of doing the truth in love. The Gospel

itself shows that Jesus brought not peace but division, for he made everyone decide for him or against him. No doubt, he wanted everyone to decide for him, and there would have been no division had they done so. And even those who decided against him were not condemned by Jesus, but only by their own rejection of him if they persisted in it despite every subsequent grace. But still, he accepted division and even the eternal divorce of some for the sake of Truth. The saints, likewise, often occasioned conflict by their fidelity to Christian truth and love when many around them compromised with unbelief and the alienation of the sinful world.

First, it might seem uncharitable but is really a work of Christian love to clarify important issues and to point out serious abuses in the Church, even when doing so superficially disrupts the harmony of the ecclesial community. To some extent false teachings and practical abuses become institutionalized; to say or do anything about them is to threaten a comfortable *modus vivendi*. Talk which sounds impolite and action which seems harsh by common sense standards often are required by the standards of Christian judgement.

### Essentials compromised

Second, it might seem uncharitable but is really a work of Christian love to resist trends which threaten essential aspects of faith and Christian life. The temptation is to tolerate what one ought to challenge, and thus to become so used to really outrageous ways of talking and acting that one complacently allows essentials to be com-



promised. It is a sign of charity when one remains as sensitive today as good Catholics ever have been to every deviation from faith and right order in the Church. Something is seriously wrong if one's threshold of sensitivity constantly rises so that only new and unusual deviations are felt as evil.

Third, it might seem uncharitable but is really a work of Christian love to recognize as fact the alienation between true Christian standards and the standards of the secular world. A Catholic scholar has to be very careful not to submit unreservedly to the standards of the secular academic establishment, because in some important ways these standards are conditioned upon the rejection as servile of the obedience of faith. At times this necessary care will mean parting company

with those who claim to maintain a “moderate” or “centrist” position — that is, a supposedly reasonable position between the “conservative” and the “liberal” extremes. In reality, the “moderate position” often is no more than a compromise between the radicality of Christian faith and a fully conscious secular humanism. Looked at reflectively, this compromise is not even meaningful, for it says both “Yes” and “No” to the Gospel.

#### **Error cannot be ignored**

Fourth, it might seem uncharitable but is really a work of Christian love for bishops and others who share their pastoral office to fulfill with courage and firmness their duty of teaching and governing. Teaching and governing on behalf of the Good Shepherd is a matter of sacramental responsibility, not just a matter of doing a job to bring about certain results. One who acts in Christ’s name must leave the fruit of his work to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it will seem that various evil effects could be avoided by ignoring dissent and disorder in the Church. But at such times, the good pastor will say to himself: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16), and he will fulfill his mission out of season just as vigorously as he fulfills it in season (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Fifth, it might seem uncharitable but is really a work of Christian love to defend what the Church teaches. Pope Paul VI said in *Humanae Vitae* that it is an eminent work of charity to diminish in no way the saving teaching of Christ. Anyone who reads the New Testament — especially 2 John, 2 Peter, and the Pastorals — will see

clearly enough that “peace at any price” is no part of the apostolic attitude. Nor did the early Church consider false teaching to be a matter of innocent mistakes or licit pluralism. The persistent holding of views at odds with apostolic preaching was considered vicious subversion.

Sixth, it might seem uncharitable but is really the work of Christian love to recognize that enemies are enemies. To recognize people as enemies is not to condemn them as evil, but is to be clearly aware that they are acting against what one believes to be the common good to which one is committed. To pretend that enemies are friends is to foster an illusion which is contrary to honesty and damaging to true unity. Charity demands love of enemies, and this means that one must know enemies for what they are, but still try to communicate with them for the sake of Christ and the good of his Church, and also always hope and pray for their salvation.

#### **All is not well**

There surely are a great many people of good will who share certain viewpoints of the theologians who have adopted consequentialism; there are others who honestly feel they must condone what these theologians are doing. Heaven knows it has been easy enough to become confused in recent years. We need not and ought not to condemn any particular individual.

Still, one cannot pretend that everything in the Church is as it should be. The present situation is very unhealthy, with a quiet schism already far advanced. On the one side are the pope, the bishops who stand with him, many

scholars who are docile to received Catholic teaching, and a large part of the clergy and laity. On the other side are the theologians who have engaged in illicit dissent and those who have taken up their cause or sought the shelter of their opinions. Wandering in the no-soul's-land between the two sides are many of the faithful, not a few of the clergy, and even a few bishops.

Those who engage in illicit dissent against the Church's moral teaching hardly expect the pope and the bishops to endorse their positions. But endorsement is unnecessary. All they ever needed, all they need now, is toleration. For if the theologians who have adopted consequentialism can keep their status as acceptable Catholic teachers — if their views are treated as legitimate theological opinions — then the dissenting positions prevail. For in practice the moral teaching of the Church is the whole spectrum of legitimate options. People will follow whichever tolerated opinion they like, and children will be taught whichever tolerated opinion appeals to those who teach them.

If I had limited my paper at the Washington workshop to an analysis and a critique of consequentialism as a theory, I doubt that anyone would have minded. But I gave reasons for a practical conclusion which I drew out explicitly: that dissent based on consequentialism against the Church's moral teaching is not a legitimate theological option, and that such dissent ought not to be accepted as licit by anyone who shares in pastoral responsibility in the Church.

#### Inaction lends consent

This conclusion challenges the present advantageous position of the dissenters. It makes clear that no one responds adequately to the dissent by a mere *pro forma* repetition of the Church's teaching. To treat opinions based on consequentialism as legitimate (even while formally rejecting them) is in fact to contribute to establishing such dissenting opinions as the teaching in practice of the Church — one might say "as the teaching of the Church recumbent."

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**. . . the argument has been used by dissenters themselves that the fact that they remain in good standing and continue to enjoy some authorization to teach in the Church establishes the legitimacy of their views as a theological opinion.**

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This sort of challenge to the status of the dissenting opinions is a threat to the theologians who hold them as well as to those who have taken up their cause or sought the shelter of these opinions. Naturally, such a threat is taken personally. There is a tendency to respond in kind, and so some did respond with the personal and *ad hominem* suggestion that it was uncharitable of me to offer this challenge.

Of course, if I believed that the positions which I criticized were legitimate, my conclusion that such dissent should not be tolerated would be uncharitable. Those who reacted negatively ought to have challenged my conclusion by arguing that the use of consequentialism is a proper method in Catholic theology. Instead they merely assumed the contradictory of my thesis that dissent based on consequentialism is illicit. Had they openly argued against my conclusion while simply assuming the proposition which I had tried to disprove, their argument would have been question-begging and obviously so. Their negative reaction was analogous to a question-begging argument, but more effective and more subtle than any argument could have been.

Why more effective and more subtle? Because one who is criticized for lack of charity can hardly ignore

the criticism. It demands sincere examination of conscience. Defects in charity are there to be found, and one must seek to repair them. I realize my own defects in charity and pray for God's mercy. I criticize the positions of others when I have reasons for thinking them false; I criticize the actions of others when I have reasons for thinking them objectively wrong. I do not intend to judge the conscience of others, but perhaps I have slipped at times into uncharitable confusion between the objective and the subjective morality of the acts of others. If so, I truly seek their forgiveness. And so I hope that by God's mercy the dissenting theologians and I — and all involved and affected — will be brought together in heaven.

#### **Illicit dissent is malignant**

Meanwhile, I intend to be silenced neither by my own real defects nor by the appearance of uncharitableness which is likely to arise when one argues that what others are doing is wrong — seriously, *objectively* wrong. Unfortunately the appearance of uncharitableness is almost unavoidable in the present atmosphere when one speaks the truth with clarity, for many seem no longer able to make the distinction between the objective morality of acts and the subjective responsibility of persons acting.

Nor can I admit it to be divisive to clarify the present situation in the Church. The clothiers, not the child who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes, were responsible for his nakedness. I do not welcome the schism which has been created by illicit theological dissent. I only call attention to

the situation in the hope that it might be remedied. But there is not likely to be a remedy for this condition until its reality and gravity is brought to full consciousness.

I urge all who share in pastoral responsibility in the Church to be silenced neither by any defects they might have, nor by any mere appearance of uncharitableness. Illicit theological dissent must be treated for what it is. It is a malignancy, not growing pains. It is not going to go away by itself. To deal with it as if it were a legitimate theological option is to foster it.

#### **Are there alternatives?**

In recent years, both the Holy See and the bishops have reaffirmed constant and very firm Catholic teaching on matters such as contraception, abortion, fornication, and the indissolubility of consummated sacramental marriages. Many who share pastoral responsibility in the Church and who wholeheartedly reject illicit dissent from teachings such as these nevertheless believe that they have little choice but to tolerate such dissent. What is the alternative? The use of disciplinary measures not only would lead to a bruising struggle but also probably would drive dissent underground, not eliminate it. And even those who agree that the Church's teaching on matters such as those mentioned has been proposed infallibly by the ordinary magisterium of the Church do not think heresy trials would help to heal the present division in the Church.

I by no means advocate heresy trials. But there are measures which can and should be taken *in the line of teaching*

which could make clear that dissent based upon consequentialism is illicit, that it is not condoned, that it is not accepted in the Church.

First, when the Church's moral teaching is reaffirmed, its authoritativeness and exclusive legitimacy should be underlined. It is urgent to exclude the view that theological opinions against the Church's constant and very firm teaching may be used in the formation of a Catholic conscience.

Second, the general principles of the dissenting moral theology, not merely its specific normative conclusions, should be rejected authoritatively. The proposition, "Spouses may responsibly decide according to their conscience

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that artificial contraception in some circumstances is permissible and indeed necessary to preserve and foster the values and sacredness of marriage," was asserted by some dissenting theologians in 1968. Little did most bishops imagine that the same kind of argument would be used — as it has been — to justify particular acts of abortion, fornication, adultery, and virtually every sort of act the Catholic Church has condemned as always wrong. The proposition of 1968 has been generalized into the explicit consequentialist thesis: Anyone may responsibly decide in accordance with his or her conscience that any sort of action whatsoever is permissible and even obligatory in appropriate circumstances to preserve and foster proportionate goods or to avoid disproportionate evils. This general proposition ought to be explicitly condemned. It is contrary to faith and is rationally indefensible. (No one should confuse it with the sound, traditional principle that one who does good sometimes may accept bad side effects.)

#### **Withdraw teaching authority**

Third, the bishops need not seek out dissenters, but they should withdraw all ecclesial authority to teach from anyone whom they know engages in illicit dissent. As Vatican II makes clear, other teachers in the Church only teach by sharing in the teaching authority of the bishops (LG 28, DV 10, and PO 6). Hence when a bishop withholds or withdraws from someone an authorization to teach, the bishop's act need not be considered a disciplinary measure. It is not a punishment but a *teaching measure*, because those who

teach with a bishop's authorization exercise the bishop's own teaching authority. The bishop himself remains responsible to Christ. Because the faithful and even the world sense this to be so, everyone quite reasonably assumes that a bishop approves what he authorizes others to teach. And so in practice the Church teaches what the bishops knowingly permit to be taught with their authority, even though they personally hold and reaffirm the moral truth which the Catholic Church has held and handed on through the centuries.

#### **Standing condones legitimacy**

Someone will object that the bishops only tolerate and do not cooperate in affirming dissenting opinions which they personally and clearly reject. But the argument has been used by dissenters themselves that the fact that they remain in good standing and continue to enjoy some authorization to teach in the Church establishes the legitimacy of their views as a theological option. Indeed, some go so far as to claim that on certain questions the "consensus of theologians" is so weighty that the Church's constant moral teaching no longer is a respectable opinion, and that a pastoral practice according to such teaching must now be excluded as rigoristic.

In dogmatic theology tolerated opinions can remain mere speculation, and so they do not automatically gain status as part of the Church's teaching. But in moral theology a licit theological opinion is going to be accepted in practice. Thus any licit opinion in moral theology becomes part of the spectrum which constitutes the

Church's actual moral teaching. And if the Church's true teaching is comparatively demanding, a less demanding opinion which is accepted as licit is likely to prevail. For this reason, in morality the bishops actually teach more by what they allow than by what they say.

I have no illusion that the teaching measures I have outlined can be carried out easily and without some bad side effects. But I believe that charity toward the Church which is suffering from illicit dissent requires these teaching measures. It was easy to imagine in 1968 that whatever good is at stake in contraception, whatever evil is done by it, simply was not worth the price of firmness against dissent. But I believe a case can be made for saying that those who continue to authorize others to teach consequentialism today are cooperating — one trusts without realizing it — in killing the unborn and in many other evils. I know that this statement seems terribly harsh, but I believe it is strictly true. And I believe that the duty of fraternal correction, which belongs to charity, demands that it be said.

### **Do bishops teach dishonestly?**

Some of the dissenting theologians have openly demanded that the division created by their dissent be healed by an admission by the pastors of the Church that received Catholic moral norms are false, despite the fact that these same pastors have reaffirmed these norms repeatedly until now. Such dissenters imply that the bishops teach dishonestly.

I find it incredible that our Fathers in Christ teach dishonestly in his name.

***In practice the Church teaches what the bishops knowingly permit to be taught with their authority, even though they personally hold and reaffirm the moral truth which the Catholic Church has held and handed on through the centuries.***

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I imply nothing worse than that some of them at times might be somewhat timid and more than a little confused, as even St. Peter was when he failed to carry out perfectly an important point of Christian teaching which he personally had clearly affirmed (cf. Gal. 2:11-14; Acts 15:6-11). My request and my prayer is that, with the help of the Holy Spirit upon whom they are entitled to rely, our Fathers in Christ will reflect more adequately upon the significance of what they allow others to teach, and that they personally will continue to teach with the full courage of their sincere Catholic convictions.

One last point. I have given reasons for what I have said. If my arguments are not sound, if the conclusions are false, I hope that someone more able will correct me. In what I have written here as in everything I write — in everything I *think* — I submit gladly and without reservation to the better judgment of the Church. From one who is my Father in Christ I am ready to accept as the word of the Lord whatever correction I need. ■

*\*A cassette recording of the above article may be obtained from: Cardinal Communications, Box 34, New London, Conn. 06320. Price \$3.00 postpaid (Canada: add 50¢).*