

Notes from Joe O'Callaghan on Fr. Charles Curran talk, 10/12/06

For those of you who were unable to hear Fr. Charles Curran speak at the Upper Room in Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in New Rochelle on last Thursday, let me try to give a summary of his remarks. Others who were present may wish to add theirs.

Fr. Curran spoke about four major themes: loyal dissent, the title of his book, published by Georgetown U. Press; theological controversies at Catholic University; the state of theology in the Church today; and the Church today. I may be a bit fuzzy on the last two.

He explained that loyal dissent means that, while holding fast to the core beliefs of the Catholic Church (e.g., the person and nature of Christ, the sacramental system, the role of the pope), one may dissent from other non-infallible positions. He pointed out that non-infallible means that these are fallible positions. So he sees himself as a loyal son of the Church, even though he disagrees or dissents from certain teachings, specifically in the area of moral theology.

After receiving two doctorates in Sacred Theology from the Anselmian and Gregorian Universities in Rome, he taught at St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester, NY, his home diocese, before moving on to Catholic U. He was then in his early thirties, but he had already caught the attention of one right wing critic in Rochester who wrote to all the priests at Catholic U. warning them against him. When Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* Fr. Curran and other theologians at CU and across the country drew up a statement saying, in effect, that Catholics could follow their consciences in the matter of birth control. He and his colleagues obtained a copy of the encyclical from a priest, who later became bishop on Long Island, then working for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This created a furor and the board of trustees of CU, mostly bishops I suspect, voted not to renew his contract. However, the faculty had already voted to promote him to associate professor and to grant him tenure. A five day strike ensued and the University was shut down, until the board of trustees backed down.

Thereafter Fr. Curran was dogged by Cardinal Ratzinger and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith until JP II declared that he was not fit to serve as a Catholic theologian. So he lost his position at CU but now holds a chair at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He said that the correspondence with Ratzinger was unsatisfactory. He sent on a series of questions, such as, is it possible to dissent from non-infallible teachings, but he received no answer. Instead the CDF drew certain statements from his writings and indicated that they contradicted various Church teachings. As an aside, he said that the only people concerned about contraception today are people in the Vatican.

He recalled that one of his colleagues asked him, where are all the giants of theology today? The question was prompted by the deaths of major figures such as Bernard Lonergan and John Courtney Murray. Fr. Curran pointed out that when he was beginning his career, the only place where one could obtain a degree in theology was in the seminary and the only place granting a doctorate was Catholic U. The theologians were all priests. However, in the 1960s there was recognition that Catholic universities ought to offer theology courses to undergraduates rather than the apologetics that was common prior to that time. That meant that trained theologians were needed; that also meant that not every priest on a university faculty was competent to teach theology. So not only did the number of trained theologians with advanced degrees increase, but master's and doctoral programs were introduced in most Catholic universities across the country.

This would seem to differentiate between core beliefs that one must hold to be truly Catholic and debatable issues. Most importantly, while there may be disagreement, we must all act with charity to one another, especially toward those with whom we disagree. Theologies have all grown more complex. It also means that more and more women have entered the field and have brought a unique perspective to every aspect of theology.

Fr. Curran also made the point that the Church is in need of structural change and he had some nice things to say about VOTF. He commented that whereas Vatican II had changed the spirit of the Church in many ways, the structures were left unchanged, pretty much as they were fifty years ago.

Perhaps some of the others in attendance will add their own recollections of the evening. It was well worth it.

Members whom I saw included: Peg Mooney, Jeanne Fogg, Joanne Bray, Jim Ebzery, Gary and Kay Cohen, Tom and Kathy Malarkey, John Lee, Ann Pollack, Gloria Seymour, Marge Hickey, and Sheila Rietano. So we were very well represented.

Fr. Curran quoted an old Latin phrase that justifies his position:

In necessariis, unitas, in dubiis, libertas, in omnibus, charitas.

In necessary or essential matters, unity; in doubtful matters, freedom; in all things, charity.