

EIR Feature

The Vatican tries to save the American Church

by Vivian Freyre Zoakos

The Vatican's Aug. 18 condemnation of American Catholic theologian Charles E. Curran, barring him from teaching Catholic theology at any Catholic institution, has brought into the limelight the fact that dramatic developments are occurring inside Roman Catholicism. Few doubted the accuracy of Curran's statement, made in the course of his Aug. 20 Washington press conference, that it was not he personally who was the target of the Vatican, but the entire "mainstream" of the American Catholic Church, through him.

The actual significance of the Curran Affair, however, does not fundamentally lie in the fact that the Vatican has decided to engage in the long-overdue task of cleaning up what Pope Leo XIII once dubbed "the American Heresy"—dramatic though such a development be in its own right.

What lends the current activities of the Church such international strategic significance, for Catholics and non-Catholics alike, is the fact that a global institution of enormous moral weight—the Catholic Church—has taken up the gauntlet, in militant fashion, to do battle against the cultural-philosophical underpinnings of the political crisis now facing Western civilization, and is willing to clean up its own house in the process. Along with *EIR*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect for the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pope's closest ally in this fight, has identified that problem as *Gnosticism*.

In numerous recent writings, Ratzinger and the Pope have described the prevalent, current form of Gnosticism as that of a deified pluralism. Freedom has become confused with the right to hold and defend the opinion of the individual or of groups, without reference to higher, accepted principles of moral law. As Ratzinger put it in his March 22 "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation": "Truth . . . is . . . the root and the rule of freedom. . . . [But] the recognition of a juridical order as a guarantee of relationships within the great family of peoples is growing weaker and weaker."

The Pope, in his most recent encyclical issued May 18, makes the point even more powerfully. He describes the one sin which the Gospels report as alone being unforgivable "in this world or in the world to come." That sin, called "blasphemy



"The Church emerged from the Synod, at least in principle, both re-rooted in its unique Apostolic, Augustinian tradition, and committed to using that tradition to intervene into world affairs at the highest levels." Pictured: One of Raphael's cartoons for the Acts of the Apostles tapestries (1517-18). This scene shows Saints Peter and John confronting Ananias, a Christian who secretly withheld wealth from the Church and was struck dead by the Holy Spirit.

against the Holy Spirit," is the one the Pope identifies as prevalent in the current world. "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," he says, "is the sin committed by the person who claims to have a 'right' to persist in evil—in any sin at all . . . as it were, an impenetrability of conscience, a state of mind which could be described as fixed by reason of a free choice. . . . In our own time, this attitude of mind and heart is perhaps reflected in the loss of the sense of sin,¹¹ the idea that anything goes; that it is one's free, democratic right to engage in any activity whatsoever [emphasis in original].^X

This, and nothing less, is the real issue in the Curran affair. Curran was targeted precisely because, as he has repeatedly and correctly claimed, he is indeed in the "mainstream" of American Catholic theological thought. The militancy of Curran's moral pluralism makes him a paradigmatic "blasphemer against the Holy Spirit."

Pluralism vs. the Magisterium

Ratzinger's letter to Father Curran, informing Curran that he was henceforward relieved of permission to teach Catholic theology, is a radical document by virtue of the fact that it insists on orthodoxy, no matter what the cost.

For years, the American and other national Catholic churches have willfully misrepresented the Vatican II Council as giving them the license to do and practice whatever they wished: This had reached a point of radical pluralism best expressed, in writing, in the document authored by the British Catholic Church last November, on the occasion of

the Extraordinary Synod then held at the Pope's behest.

The British document, heartily endorsed and practiced by the majority of the American hierarchy, went so far as to claim "a kind of infallibility" for the prevalent opinions or beliefs—be they what they may—of the collectivity of the laity and their prelates. This is an assertion of majority opinion as the measure of truth, a hedonistic radicalism which has led to the evil excesses indicated by the accompanying article (see page 23.)

The implicit threat behind such assertions, naturally, was that if central Church authority attempted to seriously rein in the radicals, there would ensue a likely schism or split of the national churches away from Rome. This implied threat has kept Popes at bay for years.

Ratzinger's letter, however, calls that bluff in the strongest terms.

Unlike earlier famous cases, such as that of the Swiss-based Fr. Hans Küng, Curran was not censored for denying any of the handful of explicitly "infallible" doctrines of the Church. Were that the case, the Curran affair would be much less important, and would hardly have kicked up the international outcry which it has done. Ratzinger instead tells Curran:

"One must remember the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which clearly does not confine the infallible Magisterium [teaching authority] purely to matters of faith nor to solemn definitions."

There is an "organic unity" and "method" to "authentic

Catholic theology” which “is intimately bound to fidelity to the Church’s Magisterium.”

In other words, the body of fundamental truth and knowledge, including on matters of morality, for which the Church has been a repository for nearly two millennia, has itself the mantle of infallibility, and its flaunting will no longer be tolerated.

The Vatican on worldwide offensive

From Nov. 25 to Dec. 8 of last year, the Pope sponsored an Extraordinary Synod of Catholic Bishops from around the world. As *EIR* reported at that time, the task of that Synod was to “chart a path for an ‘opening to the world’ that would do away with the anarchistic ‘pluralism’ of the previous 20 years. The Church emerged from the Synod, at least in principle, both re-rooted in its unique Apostolic, Augustinian tradition, and committed to using that tradition to intervene into world affairs at the highest levels.” What we are witnessing today, both within the United States and elsewhere, is the carrying out of that intent, already pre-announced in Rome last November-December.

Since that time, the Pope and Cardinal Ratzinger have played the leading role in beginning the mammoth task of cleaning out the heretical encroachments that had taken root within the Church itself. Only in that way could the Church as an institution play a sorely needed role in shaping current world affairs, at a level of cultural and philosophical depth which very few other institutions can approximate.

Among the actions taken thus far, apart from those explicitly aimed at the American Church, the following are included:

- In accordance with the Pope’s stated wishes at the Synod, a commission has been created to draft a new Catechism for the Catholic Church worldwide. The purpose of the Catechism is to provide for the international Church a compendium of unified teaching. As an assurance of that teaching’s high philosophical and theological quality, the Vatican announced on July 9 that Cardinal Ratzinger had been named by the Pope to head the commission drafting the document.

- The Extraordinary Synod had taken up, as an important topic of discussion, the problem of cults, today, as a function of a cultural degeneracy whose evil influence had also become broadly manifest inside Catholicism. On May 4, a Vatican report on sects, cults and new religious movements was released as the joint document of three Vatican secretariats. The document backed up some of the Pope’s statements and warnings respecting the differences between cults which are proliferating today and legitimate religions—which all share a fundamental idea of truth.

- Liberation Theology has come under attack from the Vatican in a series of ways. Cardinal Ratzinger authored a stinging letter of reprobation to the Franciscan Order, which is among the strongest hierarchical supporters of the proto-

Marxist, Arian, Liberation Theology that currently permeates portions of the Ibero-American, as well as North American and European Churches. The letter, released to the public this Aug. 14, was addressed to the Franciscan Superior General, the California priest Fr. John Vaughn. Ratzinger told Vaughn that “a timely intervention is demanded to remedy, modify and overcome a radical mentality of dissent which is being expressed also by . . . persons with responsibility in the Order of the Minor Friars [Franciscans], with an attitude of challenging and criticizing the ecclesiastical Magisterium.”

The idea of freedom

The letter to Vaughn followed by two months the release of Ratzinger’s second “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation.” The document pulls the rug out from Liberation Theology by showing the contradictions and evils into which so-called liberation movements have been plunged. Grounding freedom as an idea whose roots lie with Christianity, Ratzinger shows up the “serious ambiguities concerning the very meaning of freedom ‘which] have from the very beginning plagued [liberation] movements from within.”

Ratzinger accordingly situates freedom first in the freedom to do good, to be one with God, which is the cornerstone of any true republic and hence of any sincere liberation.

The Pope’s cited encyclical, *On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*, pounds away at this same theme, the cornerstone of all the best coming out of the Vatican today. The encyclical, issued last May, has been in turn complemented by a series of papal pronouncements which have raised the ire of Gnostic “Catholic” pluralists throughout the globe.

Among these pronouncements were the three papal speeches, on Aug. 13, 15, and 16, on the reality of the Devil warning repeatedly that he—Evil—is a real being whose influence in the world today is growing “as man and mankind move away from God.” The speeches have stirred up angry rebuttals from lay and clerical radical liberal circles, who reject the stark papal reminder that evil does indeed exist; that there is a right and wrong, and all opinions are not equally valid.

Most recently, the Pope has returned to a theme which he raised at the Extraordinary Synod: the importance of the theological current represented by the great Augustine of Hippo, who more than any other human individual is rightly identified as the father of Western civilization at its best. On Aug. 28, the Pope issued a pastoral letter on the subject of St. Augustine, in which he urged theologians to study him to gain the proper grounding for their work. Significantly, the pastoral follows Augustine in exalting reason as co-equal with faith. “He [Augustine] listened to faith, but exalted reason no less, giving to each its own primacy, both of time and importance. . . . A faith which does not reason is no faith.”