

Cardinal Ratzinger: bishops vs. theologians

Named by Pope John Paul II in 1981 to head the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has waged a courageous battle to defend traditional Catholic doctrine and the Church's magisterium from the assaults of "liberation" theology. He was an architect of the extraordinary synod convened by the Pope in 1985, where he denounced the immorality of both Soviet and Adam Smith's doctrines of political economy, and denounced Theodore Roosevelt and Rockefeller for spreading the immoral theological doctrines of sociologist Max Weber into the Americas.

Ratzinger served as archbishop of Munich before being called to his present duties at the Vatican.

The speech by Cardinal Ratzinger which we excerpt here was delivered on March 8 to the meeting with American Archbishops. Titled "The Bishop as Teacher of the Faith," it quotes documents of the Second Vatican Council, to the effect that "by divine institution bishops have succeeded to the place of the Apostles as shepherds of the Church, and he who hears them, hears Christ." The cardinal criticizes the implementation of this directive.

The balance is seen to tip much less toward the positive, however, as soon as we begin to think about the developments in catechesis in the post-conciliar period. To large extent, this area has been turned over to the so-called professional. This, in turn, has led to an excess of experimentation, which often makes the actual topic vanish from our sight, and to a confusion of voices, making it all the more difficult to recognize that of the Gospel. The problem becomes more evident, if we think about the relationship between bishop and theologians who are no longer active in just the quiet realm of academic research and teaching. They frequently perform their quite dissonant concert for all the public with the instruments of the mass media in such a way that their voice drowns out that of the Bishop-Evangelist. Despite all the indisputable efforts by bishops to proclaim the Word, theologians in many parts of the world have taken the place of the Bishop as Teacher. Although much good has also come to pass in this way, on the whole the result has to be seen predominantly as one of uncertainty and confusion: The contours of the faith are vanishing behind reflections which ought to be illuminating it.

In this context, I have to mention a particular development of this post-conciliar time which calls for our special

attention. We heard how the Second Vatican Council gave precedence to the bishop's mission of proclaiming the Word. If we would look now at the theological literature of the period after the Council on this question, we would discover surprisingly that this statement has remained practically without commentary. What we find instead in the literature are explanations which attempt to reduce the Episcopate to a kind of spiritual administration. . . . All these theses have not remained in the academic realm; rather they have been transformed into a kind of pressure which is exerted upon the bishop: It would be his task to avoid polarizations, to appear as a Moderator acting within the plurality of existing opinions, but he himself is not to become "partisan" in any substantive way. Now this is always correct, if the question is just one of scholarly differences. But it is wrong, if what comes into issue is the faith itself. For the faith, entry into the Church does not constitute a "partisan act."

Actually, we have to confess that bishops have submitted in large measure to this scheme of things and have little exercised their teaching authority in opposition to theologians. . . .

This is where we encounter the background of our modern culture, the issue of the proper relationship between this culture and the Gospel. Modern culture tells us first of all that it is not possible to distinguish clearly between faith and theology and, even if it should be possible, it can only be the specialist in any case, the theologian not the Shepherd, who is competent. . . .

Our modern world makes a distinction between two spheres of life, that of action and that of reflection. In the sphere of action, a person needs something like Authority which is functionally based and which becomes active within the framework of its area of operation. In the sphere of reflection, there can be no authority. . . . However, if these notions hold sway, this means that the Church, while surely able to dispense pious advice, will not be able to bear witness to the truth in a way that is binding and thereby to call people to a commitment.

In the hierarchy of values of today's world, the free rights of the individual and those accorded to the mass media take highest place, while the objective, moral values, about which there is no agreement anyway, are banished to the realm of the individual where they merit no public defense from the Community. There is, to put it bluntly, a right to act immorally, but morality itself has no rights. In contrast to the one-sidedness of former epochs, this can have its advantage. On the other hand, the commission of witnessing to the truth of the Gospel brings one also to suffering for it.

But this is at the same time the very positive conclusion toward which our deliberations have been leading: It is the hallmark of truth to be worth suffering for. In the deepest sense of the word, the Evangelist must also be a martyr. If he is unwilling to do so, he should not lay his hand to the plow. . . .