

Cardinal O'Connor: the Church in America

John Cardinal O'Connor is a traditionalist Catholic considered to be one of the Pope and Cardinal Ratzinger's key allies in the United States. He was consecrated a bishop in 1979, and was one of the five members of the drafting committee of the American bishops' 1983 pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," in which he toned down the more extreme anti-defense views of the other drafters.

Pope John Paul II appointed him bishop of Scranton in May 1983, and then head of the New York Archdiocese a year later. O'Connor was subsequently named to the College of Cardinals. As New York's archbishop, O'Connor has wrangled with the pro-abortion and pro-euthanasia lobbies. In 1984, he refused to sign a New York City mayoral order banning discrimination in employment or hiring based on "sexual orientation or affectional preference," arguing that this would mean condoning homosexuality. O'Connor has been instrumental in defending the Pope's attempt to crack down on the more egregious examples of the American heresy, e.g., siding with the Vatican in the case of dissident theologian Charles Curran.

The speech excerpted here was given by Cardinal O'Connor to the meeting of the American Archbishops at the Vatican on March 8. Footnotes have been omitted.

. . . Let me make clear that the bishops of the United States have been first and foremost articulate and courageous teachers of the faith for the two centuries of our existence. . . . But there are serious impediments to the teaching *effectiveness* of American bishops. Some impediments, I suspect, are common to the world at large. Others that we tend to see as peculiarly American are also fairly common elsewhere. Still others are unique to the United States.

Universal impediments to episcopal teaching

Two impediments to effective episcopal teaching which I suspect are relatively common to the episcopacy throughout the world relate, respectively, to Vatican II and *Humanae Vitae*, though caused by neither.

First, Vatican II. While there was a reasonable amount

of preparation by various commissions *prior* to the deliberations of Vatican II, there was virtually no *post*-Vatican II preparation of the Church at large to receive, understand, and rationally implement the conciliar documents. We are still trying to recover from the chaos of misunderstanding and deliberate distortions. A tremendous number of *American Catholics*, at least, learned all they thought they had to know about the Council from the mysterious and ubiquitous Xavier Rynn of the *New Yorker* magazine. This is terribly serious. We still have millions of Catholics, and not a few priests and religious, who talk esoterically about the "spirit" of Vatican II—accusing many bishops of resisting that spirit—when they themselves have never read a single Council document. I had to spend four years in New York in preparation for a Synod in getting people to study the conciliar documents. Because of this gross ignorance, many people, equating abstinence from fish on Friday with the validity of the Holy Trinity, gave up the latter—and much other Church teaching—when they learned they were no longer bound by the former. . . .

The second major impediment to episcopal teaching throughout the world, I believe, developed out of the manner of preparing for, the extensive delay in the promulgation of, and the variety of interpretations given to *Humanae Vitae*. I believe that circumstances surrounding the publication of *Humanae Vitae* seriously eroded the credibility of Church teaching. I am not for a moment questioning the validity of *Humanae Vitae*. I am saying that when Catholics learned—and it took them no time at all—that they could shop around among confessors for opinions on birth control, they soon decided that they really didn't have to confess the matter at all. In my judgment we have not yet recovered from this confusion. One gets a sense that a kind of moral free enterprise system took over at some point. The "moral market" has been allowed to float. . . .

'American' impediments to episcopal teaching

A. Commonly recognized problems (not unique to America)

Bishops must teach largely through others: priests, religious, deacons, lay persons. While it is unfortunate that not all of our priests preach effectively, this problem is reasonably correctable. Harder to correct, however, is the loss of teaching religious and the theological or ecclesiological confusion demonstrated by some—by no means all—who still do teach. Teachers committed to radical feminism, for example, whether priests, religious or lay, are quite capable of distorting doctrine. At the same time, it must be admitted that sexism is a reality. It provides grist for the mill of radical feminism, and threatens the credibility of bishops who try to teach about justice—as does serious underpayment of lay persons, men and women, who work for the Church. Most troublesome of all "isms," however, is racism, which makes

a mockery of episcopal teaching about the sacredness of every human person. That it still plagues the Church is tragically obvious.

The media and the movies are often horrifying perverters of family values and constitute very grave obstacles to episcopal teaching. A view that Catholicism has canonized capitalism is a severe obstacle to teaching social and economic justice in some quarters. (Some Catholics have learned too well Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.) Both "rightist" and "leftist" newspapers and journals that call themselves Catholic, but constantly attack bishops, individually and collectively, are surely an impediment to the teaching ministry. In a world of constant flux, it is difficult for bishops to be heard when they teach that the Church still exists primarily to help people reach an eternal goal. . . .

A certain number of bishops at some point during the past 20 years or so have seemed to lose confidence, first in themselves as persons, then in their magisterial authority, perhaps in the face of some hard-hitting theologians, perhaps out of fear of the press. (*Mirabile dictu!*) At times the bishop convinces himself that peace is the highest good. Sometimes, if I may say so respectfully, a bishop may not want to enter battle over authoritative church teaching called into doubt by dissenting theologians, pastors, religious, lay persons or the secular or religious press because he fears that neither the National Conference of Catholic Bishops nor Rome will support him. He may consider twisting slowly in the wind to be highly unepiscopal and inordinately uncomfortable. . . .

Next, we are developing in our country with frightening speed a consistent ethic of death, with some 20 million abortions since 1973, and euthanasia under a variety of euphemistic terms becoming acceptable to the point that laws authorizing outright suicide may be just around the corner.

Finally, within this category of "commonly recognized problems" (and this could require a paper of its own), we are still recovering from Vietnam. In a letter of April 23, 1866, Karl Marx wrote to Fredrick Engels: "After the Civil War phase the United States are really only now entering the revolutionary phase. . . ." Nothing since the Civil War has so torn our country and induced revolution as our involvement in Vietnam. With millions of young people, every form of the "establishment" lost credibility: government, business, education, the family, the Church. In the general climate of disenchantment, traditional values were rejected as having been responsible for the war. "Free love" became widespread, as did drugs. Authority—all authority—became suspect, then rejected by many. I suspect that only an American can appreciate fully the impact of this war on the teaching mission and credibility of U.S. bishops.

B. Underlying problems less commonly recognized (unique to America)

. . . My purpose is exceedingly practical. I believe that

both the Holy See and the bishops of the United States can better appreciate why it is difficult to teach the faith in all its purity in the United States, if both understand especially the three intertwined cultural forces set forth below, however simplistically because of the press of time. These cultural forces are: one, the moral philosophies that are at the heart of the American Experience; two, group dynamics and process; three, pluralism.

I. Moral philosophies and the American experience

Bishops in the United States have always had to teach within a cultural context of four different moral philosophies, three of them uncongenial to Church teaching, namely, Pragmatism, Utilitarianism, Social Evolutionism. The fourth, Natural Moral Law, is of course quite congenial to Church teaching.

However many of the Founding Fathers were deists or pure rationalists, they were grounded in Natural Moral Law, even though modified for them by John Locke. They grasped its premises and used them to shape the Declaration of Independence and at least the Bill of Rights of the Constitution. Catholicism is preeminently attuned to the basic principles of the American Republic as articulated by the Founding Fathers in large measure because of Catholicism's affinity with *Natural Moral Law*. I suggest that Catholic moral teaching has been accepted or rejected in our country in almost direct proportion to the acceptance or rejection of Natural Moral Law in the formulation of public policy. Debates over critical moral issues have inevitably reflected this: Slavery, racism, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, and war are illustrative.

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was the most famous Supreme Court Justice our country has ever known, the justice most commonly cited in law schools ever since his day, and the author of the classic text, *The Common Law*. Justice Holmes explicitly rejected all appeal to Natural Moral Law in interpreting the Constitution. In its place, he substituted the philosophy of *Pragmatism*: the good is whatever works, or is expedient. Moral relativism entered jurisprudence and American life by way of Pragmatism, which is unconditionally hostile to all moral absolutes. I suggest that, simultaneously, the law has become the primary teacher in America. Whatever is legal is assumed to be morally good. Abortion and homosexuality, for example, are legal, hence assumed to be moral. The horrifying rise in court-assisted "euthanasia" I believe to be ultimately traceable to Justice Holmes and to his medical doctor father.

Jeremy Bentham's *Utilitarianism* took American form by way of the "Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number," a rationale which takes advantage of a political philosophy that the majority rules. It is an easy step to the concept that majority rule determines what is morally good for everyone.

Again the thrust is to reject moral absolutes or teaching about intrinsic good and evil. Doctrine becomes irrelevant.

Not the philosophical founder, but certainly the most powerful proponent of *Social Darwinism* or *Social Evolutionism* was President Theodore Roosevelt, with his hearty but destructive emphasis on “rugged individualism.” The “survival of the fittest” became the canon of all social morality. I suggest that whenever America has been imperialistic, as in its early 20th-century attitude toward Filipinos, or carried away by its self-perceived “manifest destiny,” the philosophy of Social Evolution has been the driving and destructive force. No American philosophy has been more antagonistic to the Social Gospel taught by American bishops. Worse, none has been more antagonistic to the belief that all men are created equal, or to our belief in the worth, the dignity, the sacredness of every human person as made in the Image of God. Much of today’s homelessness, bad housing, inadequate concern for the poor of the world, and especially a subtle contempt for the Third World, is rooted in this moral philosophy. [Pope John Paul II’s] *Redemptor Hominis*, with its emphasis on man as “the way,” wouldn’t stand a chance under rugged individualism and the survival of the fittest, even if Andrew Carnegie built a financial empire on the backs of the unrugged and the unsurvivable. Frederick Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, on the contrary, would fit in very well.

II. Group dynamics and process

The Vienna Circle, particularly Wittgenstein and Schlick, reached out to America by way of the Cambridge School of Analysis. *Logical Positivism* did not have to attack metaphysics. It simply treated metaphysical propositions as meaningless. Only the observable, the measurable, became important. American psychology became, through John Watson, the mere study of observable—therefore external—behavior. John Dewey turned the psychology of *Behaviorism* into an educational philosophy of *Instrumentalism* which, in large part, by way of Columbia Teachers College, in New York came to influence hundreds of thousands of teachers across America, including religious, and a very great number of educational institutions throughout the United States. In essence, learning was to be measured by change in external behavior; the purpose of teaching was to effect such change.

In the meanwhile, the form of Julien La Mettrie’s *L’Homme Machine* was at work in Norbert Wiener’s research in *Cybernetics*, or feedback mechanisms, and another physicist, Kurt Lewin, was busily developing *Group Dynamics*, the social application of such exotic mathematical concepts as topology and hodology. Relationships between peoples were determined by vectors and valences. In time, Lewin’s disciples were devising theories about *life-space*. Bethel, Maine became the summer teaching center for school teachers, again including religious, who wanted to learn about sociodrama. Encounter groups and sensitivity sessions del-

uded the country very soon thereafter, and America was caught up in *dialogue*, which was frequently unrelated to the exchange of information or the communication of truths. *Dialogue* was simply a *process* intended to achieve *consensus*. *Dialogue* was successful or unsuccessful only to the degree in which *consensus* occurred or failed to occur. Substance became irrelevant. The medium became the message.

I suggest that this entire development, rooted in the Vienna Circle, in which metaphysical propositions were considered meaningless, played a major role in the emergence of consensus theology, in which ontological truth plays little role. I suggest further that as seminaries stopped teaching philosophy, and particularly metaphysics, theology lost the language of substance and of absolutes. Theological speculation became a search for consensus, which in turn was found in *praxis*, the theological equivalent of *process*. Popular, observable behavior became the norm of truth. The formation of conscience became almost a lost art, as did the practice of confession for huge numbers, since the entire notion of *sin* became at best speculative. I suggest that an unnoticed result of group dynamics and process which has made episcopal teaching exceedingly difficult is a form of anti-intellectualism. The true and the good can be discerned only by *feeling*. It was understandable that many young people turned to Zen, while others turned to hard rock music, drugs, and free-for-all sex.

III. Pluralism

Every American bishop, including myself, would fight fiercely to preserve the American pluralistic political system, safeguarded in part by constitutional checks and balances and by a very strong commitment to the principle of “one person, one vote.” I do not know a single American bishop who would opt for a State Church. It has taken 200 years and some serious mistakes to get our system to work, and it’s still far from perfect. There can be no serious question, however, but that the Church has profited in countless ways.

Political pluralism has been undergoing changes, however, in a direction feared by some of the Founding Fathers, leaning toward the “tyranny of the minority.” Combined with the politically valid principle of “one person, one vote,” political pluralism, particularly in this deviant form of the tyranny of the minority, offers an alluring rationalization for a unique and pervasive form of theology of dissent. Magisterial teaching becomes no more authoritative than the opinion of any single individual, as my vote is as good as yours. The response to a magisterium that attempts to “impose” Church teaching is to organize into a vociferous minority, coopt the media and charge the magisterium—or even the Holy Father—with the most heinous of crimes in the American lexicon: discrimination. This has been one of the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of radical feminism, for example, used with equal zeal by some theologians who have

championed that cause. . . .

I believe I see a new phenomenon developing in the United States, which again, it would be mutually helpful for both Rome and the United States bishops to understand. Through innumerable court decisions that have made moral relativism the norm, the inordinate power of television and movies that glorify sex and violence, and are inimical to family values and cynical of all authority, a public educational system that has been almost totally secularized, and various other factors, our American culture has been changing dramatically in recent years. In response, I see the Church more and more becoming a counterculture, a voice crying in the wilderness. One need but examine recent documents of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to discover this trend. In my judgment, it is a trend that must continue. The great preacher-teacher, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, said it very clearly: "What the world needs is a voice that is right, not when the world is right, but a voice that is right when the world is wrong."

Finally, I am not unaware that those who assigned me to prepare this paper really didn't ask me to append my personal advice, but I must run the risk. First, I believe it could help both Rome and U.S. bishops if we would declare a moratorium on the use of the terms "liberal" and "conservative." These are political terms, unworthy of bishops as teachers. Paul VI reminded us that orthodoxy is the Church's main concern, and the pastoral office is her most important, divinely willed mission. Orthodoxy is neither liberal nor conservative, right wing or left wing. Orthodoxy is orthodoxy, and we're all committed to it, lock, stock and barrel, however differently we may express ourselves as individuals.

Second, I would suggest that while every bishop must teach with unambiguous clarity and courage—the courage of an Ignatius in the jaws of the lions—we must keep both our balance and our sense of humor. Nietzsche said, "The world no longer believes because believers no longer sing." St. Augustine gave us the song: "You are an Easter people, and your song is Alleluia!" Pope John XXIII warned us not to be prophets of doom. God is not finished with us yet. The resurrection is not yet complete, the Body of Christ not yet fully built up.

Third, there is an awful lot of good in our American culture, and we bishops have learned from America even while teaching it. . . . If thus far we bishops may seem to have accommodated too comfortably to the moral relativism that characterizes much of American life, give us time. We have lots of water in our country, and we'll baptize our culture yet. Some of us may not be outstanding theologians, but when the chips are down, as we say in America, we know who we are. We subscribe completely to Vatican II's *Verbum Dei*, that our preaching is ". . . the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth."

Pope John Paul II: Our criterion must be truth

The following passage is excerpted from the closing address of Pope John Paul II to the Archbishops of the United States, at the end of their March 8-11 meeting at the Vatican.

At this point we return to the difficulty which has surfaced time and time again in our discussions, *the task of handing on the truths of the faith* in a cultural context which questions the integrity and often the very existence of truth. Much of what has been discussed reflects this fundamental challenge to the contemporary Church as she seeks to evangelize. You have pointed to the many ways in which the various agents of evangelization might be helped to proclaim the truths of Scripture and Tradition more effectively. I encourage you to give these suggestions serious consideration.

It is essential that the agents, and in the first place we the pastors, speak the true message, "the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son . . . through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Romans 1:1-5). We are guardians of something given, and given to the Church universal; something which is not the result of reflection, however competent, on cultural and social questions of the day, and is not merely the best path among many, but the one and only path to salvation: "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The People of God and those near and far must *hear the name*. We are all—you and I—bound to make an examination of conscience about how we are fulfilling the task, "lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Corinthians 1:17). The true measure of our success will consist in *greater holiness, more loving service of those in need, and the advancement of truth and justice in every sphere of the life of your people and your country*. As one of our brothers so rightly said: "Success cannot be the criterion or the condition of evangelization. The criterion and condition of evangelization must be fidelity to the mission."