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Vatican academy mulls how pro-life is pro-life enough

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 30, 2012

Pope Benedict XVI waves during a meeting with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life at the Vatican Feb. 25. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

Analysis

In the normally tranquil world of the Vatican, where keeping up at least the appearance of unity is a fine art, the Pontifical Academy for Life has long been something of an outlier. There, internal tensions have a habit of erupting into full public view.

The latest such row, featuring a public call from academy members for its papally appointed leadership to resign, pivots in part on the question of just how ?pro-life? is pro-life enough to faithfully represent Catholic teaching.

Also at stake is whether affording a Vatican platform to people who don?t completely share Catholic positions risks blurring the church?s message -- or whether refusal to engage in such dialogue betrays, as one Vatican cardinal has asserted, an insecure, ?fundamentalist? position.

Founded by Pope John Paul II in 1994, the Pontifical Academy for Life is essentially a Vatican think tank composed of roughly 70 academics, medical experts and activists. It?s led by a bishop appointed by the pope, along with a small staff of Vatican personnel, and coordinated by a six-member governing council.

The recent controversy went public in early May, when Austrian Catholic philosopher and academy member Josef Seifert wrote a six-page open letter to Spanish Bishop Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, an Opus Dei member and president of the academy, to report ?enormous concern? that the academy is losing ?its full and pure commitment to truth.? The letter was released to the media.

Seifert cited two recent conferences held under the academy?s aegis as problematic: one last February on infertility, and another that had been scheduled for April on stem cell research. In both cases, Seifert charged, organizers had invited speakers who hold public positions contrary to Catholic teaching.

Seifert suggested that the academy?s leadership should step down.

Other academy members voicing complaints have included Belgian Msgr. Michel Schooyans, a retired professor at the Catholic University of Louvain; Mercedes Arzú Wilson, a Guatemalan natural family planning advocate; Christine de Vollmer, a Venezuelan who serves as president of the Latin American Alliance for the Family; and American Thomas Hilgers, founder of the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction in Omaha, Neb.

The Feb. 24 conference on infertility, part of the academy?s annual assembly, included a handful of presenters who appeared to support in vitro fertilization, despite the church?s moral opposition. Seifert blasted the event as a ?Planned Parenthood-like meeting? and called it ?the worst day? in the academy?s history.

Members also objected to another conference scheduled for April on stem cells, which was to include speakers such as George Daley of Harvard University and Children?s Hospital Boston. Daley supports embryonic stem cell research, while the church approves only research with adult cells.

That conference was canceled at the last minute. The academy?s chancellor, Italian Fr. Renzo Pegoraro, sent a letter to speakers saying the cancellation was for logistical reasons, and not ?the lobbying activity of some pro-life activists.?

That phraseology clearly irked members who had voiced concerns. In a later May 8 letter, Carrasco apologized for any offense, insisting that ?the fulcrum of our academy has always been, and is, now more than ever, the Gospel of Life.?

Sources say that both the February and April events were not actually organized by the Academy for Life, but by other organizations and academic institutions, with the academy acting only as a cosponsor. Sources told *NCR* that Carrasco privately apologized to members for the February event.

This is not the first time members of the academy have led what amounts to an insurrection.

Members offered a similar vote of no confidence in 2009 for the body?s previous president, Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who had criticized a Brazilian bishop for proclaiming that the mother and doctors of a 9-year-old girl who had an abortion following abuse by her stepfather had been excommunicated. In an article for the Vatican newspaper, Fisichella argued the emphasis instead should have been on compassion for the girl and her family.

Several academy members signed a letter of protest, and one year later the Vatican reassigned Fisichella as the first head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

Most observers feel it?s unlikely something similar will happen to Carrasco, in part because of what?s seen as his less confrontational style, and in part because he turns 75 in October and will therefore submit his resignation.

While trying to send conciliatory signals to disgruntled members, academy officials have also insisted that they won?t abandon a policy of outreach to people who don?t share church teaching.

In an interview with The Associated Press, French Fr. Scott Borgman, a member of the academy?s staff, said that an essential part of its mission is ?creating dialogue with science and not closing ourselves off.?

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Culture, struck a similar note in a recent interview with Catholic News Service. He defended a stance of listening to the opinions of those who disagree with the church, saying that fear of such exchange often occurs when someone ?doesn?t feel capable of

defending or justifying his own reasons.?

On the Catholic side, Ravasi pointedly said, such dialogue presumes ?an identity that?s serious and well-formed, not just fundamentalist.?

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