

Church crisis reflects lack of pastoral leadership

Richard McBrien | Oct. 4, 2010 Essays in Theology

Charles E. Curran, Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University, addressed the closing gathering of some 600 moral theologians from all over the world in Trent, Italy, July 27.

What follows in this week's column is taken largely from an important Sept. 7 article in the *National Catholic Reporter* by Fr. Curran: ["We cannot put our heads in the sand."](#) [1]

Curran pointed out that a previous meeting in Padua four years earlier had effectively initiated the global processes of dialogue and interchange among Catholic moral theologians.

"By definition," Curran said, "the Church Catholic is a big church, having room for both saints and sinners, people of all races and colors and languages, and people living in all parts of the world."

Curran acknowledged that less than a century ago moral theology was primarily a European enterprise, and moral theologians throughout Europe were in regular contact with one another through their writings.

Today, however, moral theology is done on every continent. At the same time, white moral theologians in the United States have "rightly been criticized for our abysmal failure to recognize the evil of racism in our country and our church, and the consequent white privilege we enjoy."

Catholic feminists have also reminded moral theologians of the "patriarchy that continues to exist in our church and our society" and liberation theologians have called attention to the plight of the poor and the socially and politically oppressed -- and of the need to make their plight an important hermeneutic principle in Catholic social ethics.

Nevertheless, as Curran listened to the discussions over the previous three days, he realized that there was one important issue that did not receive sufficient attention.

He referred specifically to the difference in methodological approaches taken by the majority of Catholic moral theologians around the world and the approach still followed by the church's hierarchical magisterium.

Curran referred more specifically still to the history of Catholic moral theology in the 20th century undertaken by Boston College's Jesuit Fr. James Keenan.

Keenan described the methodology of Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* as neo-manualist.

The theology professor pointed out that "few moral theologians found the encyclical a hospitable acceptance of their work during the 25 years since [Pope Paul VI's encyclical] *Humanae Vitae*."

In a similar vein, the great Irish moral theologian Fr. Enda McDonagh has entitled his latest book *Theology in Winter Light*.

John Paul II himself recognized this great disparity in methodological approaches as a "genuine crisis," but Curran noted that the meeting of moral theologians at Trent this summer had not really addressed this crisis.

"We cannot put our heads in the sand," Curran declared. "The present problems of priests' pedophilia and its cover-up by bishops have made many recognize the need for change in our church.

"The reality is," Curran continued, "that many people have left the church not because of disagreements with basic areas of faith and Catholic eucharistic celebration, but often because of issues mentioned above, as well as the pedophilia crisis."

Our church today, Curran insisted, is in serious trouble, and not just in Europe and the United States, although the problems there are great and need to be recognized as such and addressed.

Indeed, the second largest religious denomination in the United States today consists of Catholics who are no longer active in the church. The sense of alienation from the church is especially acute among women.

"Our love for the church and our role as Catholic moral theologians call for all of us to address these issues no matter what our positions are.... We are called to put flesh and blood on the ancient axiom, *In necessariis, unitas; in dubiis, libertas; in omnibus, caritas.*" ("In necessary matters, unity; in doubtful matters, freedom; in all things, charity.")

What Curran did not provide is a basic reason for this crisis. It is a crisis, after all, of pastoral leadership.

The facts are that John Paul I lived only thirty-three days as Pope and that John Paul II, elected at the relatively young age of 58, served as Bishop of Rome for 26 ½ years. During that time, John Paul II pursued a conscious plan to transform the hierarchy into a rigid, authoritarian body, utterly dependent on the Vatican for rewards and punishments of every kind.

With few exceptions, that plan has succeeded.

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