

Fr. Charles Curran draws fire for SMU lecture

Tom Roberts | Oct. 27, 2010 NCR Today

Fr. Charles Curran is an easy target. To those who readily dismiss him as a dissenter from official teaching, he wears a large bull's eye on his chest. There's no need to discuss what he's writing or saying first. Just take aim and shoot. For others he remains one of the few, in a church in which theological speculation has become an exercise to avoid if you want to stay out of Rome's sights, willing to ask and explore difficult questions.

Editor's note: Read NCR's account of Curran's lecture -- [Curran: How bishops challenge abortion laws is 'flawed'](#) [1]

The latest incident involving Curran, [reported here](#) [2], involves a lecture he is scheduled to give Thursday at Southern Methodist University, where he has been teaching since 1991.

Rebuked by the Vatican during the 1980s, Curran was removed from his position at the Catholic University of America for challenging some church teachings on the use of artificial birth control and other social issues.

The contretemps in Dallas began with an announcement by SMU of Curran's lecture, titled "The U.S. Catholic Bishops and Abortion Legislation: A Critique from Within the Church." According to a report in The Dallas Morning News, the university release said, "Curran's lecture will examine how U.S. Roman Catholic bishops have made opposition to legal abortion their primary social issue, and will challenge the bishops from a theological perspective for claiming too much certitude in their position."

Perhaps that's simply waving a red cape before the bull, regardless of the diocese, in today's church and today's political atmosphere. Those who have attended a Curran teaching from the radical left usually leave disappointed. He is a researched scholar who, I'd venture to say, has read more about church history and how NCR used, than most bishops anywhere. That's not to denigrate bishops, it's just to say that most of them aren't theologians. The point is that Curran takes the teaching very seriously, and when he critiques it, it is with a nuance and consideration that doesn't yield easy sound bites.

Bishop Kevin Farrell reacted immediately, reciting the "constant teaching of the church" and expressing his regrets that "Father Curran has chosen to criticize the position of the bishops of the United States on this matter." [The Fund and how NCR used, 2011 Annual Appeal is underway. Please support us](#) [3] so that we may continue to provide the best independent Catholic news through informed reporting, analysis and commentary.

Curran took issue with Farrell's characterization: "This paper is not about the Catholic moral teaching on abortion," he told the Morning News. "In fact, the paper accepts the Catholic moral teaching that direct abortion is always wrong. The paper deals solely with abortion law and argues that one who holds the Catholic moral teaching can come to different conclusions about what the law should be."

Curran, in a brief phone interview today, termed the bishop's statement "reckless and totally false. It should never have been made. I am owed a public apology."



He said he first found out about the statement when he went to liturgy Sunday at SMU and the bishop's printed comments were being passed out to those attending Mass.

What comes to mind immediately is that two U.S. archbishops, Donald Wuerl of Washington and Raymond Burke, previously of St. Louis and currently prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, are both to become cardinals at the next consistory. We all know -- as certainly does Pope Benedict XVI, who named them -- that the two hold deeply different views on the matter of whether Catholic politicians who do not support the church's position on how to deal with abortion in the legal arena should be kept from communion. In other words, they disagree on whether the church should punish lawmakers who differ on what the law should be on the matter of abortion while certainly agreeing on the efficacy of church teaching on the matter.

Another model exists for dealing with theologians who might occasionally pose a problem for church authorities in the questions they pose. Curran writes of that model in his book, *Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian*.

During the 1970s, Curran, then a professor at Catholic University in Washington, received a call from the office of Archbishop Jean Jadot, who was the Apostolic Delegate, or the pope's representative to the United States, at the time. The person who called said the nuncio wanted to meet with him regularly. Curran was somewhat suspicious, asked if the nuncio would be bringing advisers, saying he intended to bring the same number if that were the case.

A little while later, recounts Curran in his memoir, the nuncio himself called and apologized for not having contacted him personally and said he wanted to meet alone with Curran three or four times a year -- in an informal way and off the record in order to hear what I was thinking and writing. He emphasized that he would not agree with everything I said but that he thought it was important for him to know what I was saying and why.

The two began meeting regularly, engaging in very frank conversation as Curran recalls, until Jadot was recalled to Rome in 1980.

A spokesperson for the Diocese of Dallas said the bishop had not contacted Curran to find out what the lecture would be about before he issued his statement. One might ask, How about Curran notifying the bishop? But Curran, in this case, is doing what academic theologians should do and in an academic setting. Could this latest encounter have been different if Farrell had first contacted Curran and asked if they might talk about the content of the lecture so he would know whether there was anything to be concerned about?

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