

New theology document an eye-opener

Robert McClory | Mar. 19, 2012 NCR Today

In their ongoing dispute with the Obama administration, the bishops have time and again insisted that their interpretation of the situation is the only legitimate one. Cardinals Timothy Dolan and Francis George and Bishop William Lori, among others, have made it clear that they alone speak for the church, all other voices are irrelevant and good Catholics should line up behind them; disagreement is not an option. Thus the image of the Catholic church as a top-down, episcopal-driven monolith is reinforced in the public eye and in the view of many of the faithful.

But this our-way-or-the-highway approach is in marked contrast to the church's official sense of itself as expressed this month in a new document from the International Theological Commission, which displays a very different frame of reference. The commission is not to be taken lightly. It was founded in 1969 as a body of theologians appointed by the pope to advise the magisterium on matters of theology. The president is the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (currently Cardinal William Lavada). It would be hard to conceive of any official body more likely to have the ear of the top tier of the church's hierarchy.

Granted that the principal audience of the document, titled *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, are the church's theologians, the content nevertheless covers a lot that should be of interest to the full church. For example, the commission acknowledges the existence and impact of the sense of the faithful, a concept that seems to elude the attention of bishops and most of the clergy these days. "The *sensus fidelium* is of great importance," declares the text. "It is not only an object of attention and respect, it is also a base and locus for their work. Theologians depend on the *sensus fidelium* because the faith that they explore and explain lives in the people of God ... Theologians help to clarify and articulate the content of the *sensus fidelium*, recognizing and demonstrating that issues relating to the truth of the faith can be complex and that investigation of them must be precise."

"Attention to the *sensus fidelium*," the document says, "is a criterion for Catholic theology. Theology should strive to discover and articulate accurately what the Catholic faithful actually believe."

This sentence alone is a real bell-ringer. What would happen, I wonder, if theologians began to "discover and articulate accurately what the Catholic faithful actually believe" about the morality of contraception, about extending the priesthood to women, about the selection of bishops in the church, about other subjects that are not to be discussed?

Unfortunately, the commission does not get explicit about such practical matters. Instead, it tempers the discussion by reminding readers that "the magisterium is an integral factor in the theological enterprise itself, since theology receives its object from God through the Church, whose faith is interpreted by the living office of the church alone, that is by the magisterium of the pope and bishops."

Lest readers think this exaltation of the magisterium cancels out what it just claimed about the sense of the faithful, the commission makes an attempt to reconcile these two criteria. The relationship between theologians

and bishops should be one of "fruitful collaboration," says the document. "Both stand under the primacy of the Word of God and never above it. Between bishops and theologians there should be mutually respectful collaboration; in their obedient listening to the Word ... in their attention to the *sensus fidelium* ... in their concern to transmit the Word to future generations, with respect for new questions and challenges."

Much of what appears in this document cries for further expansion and explanation. Consider these statements about the role of the magisterium: "Acceptance of the function of the magisterium ... requires recognition of the different levels of magisterial affirmations. These different levels give rise to a correspondingly differentiated response on the part of the faithful and of theologians. Not all magisterial teaching has the same weight. ... Precisely because of this gradation, the obedience that theologians ... owe to the magisterium always involves constructively critical evaluation and comment. While dissent toward the magisterium has no place in Catholic theology, investigation and questioning is justified and even necessary if theology is to fulfill its task."

The commission does not explain how to distinguish "critical evaluation" from "dissent." But the upbeat tone throughout the document suggests problems will be worked out in a spirit of collaboration, open dialogue and mutual trust; after all, bishops and theologians are colleagues working on a common project.

However, that is not the tone many of us are picking up from the stories that make the news. I think the harsh one-sided condemnation of various theologians and theological views (consider, for example, Elizabeth Johnson's contentious tussle with the U.S. bishops last year) tends to cancel out the pleasant language that permeates the commission's statement. So also does the hard, unilateral line the U.S. hierarchy is taking regarding "freedom of religion."

Maybe I shouldn't be so pessimistic. Perhaps, the International Theological Commission is not telling us how things are but instead looking ahead to how things might be and ought to be. If that is the case, it's good news, coming as it does from an agency at the very height of the institutional church.

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