

THE CHURCH AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Excerpt from

“Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian”

by Charles Curran

Vatican II reminded us that the church consists of the people of God and not just their leaders in the church hierarchy.

From early times, Catholic theology attached great importance to the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) as an important source of knowledge of what the Spirit is saying to us. Contemporary theology once again emphasizes the need for the whole church to receive the teaching of the hierarchical magisterium. It is true that the hierarchical magisterium itself does not give as much importance to these theological positions today, but they are nonetheless deeply imbedded in the Church tradition and should be used by all of us. One can say truthfully not only that many in the church but to some degree the church itself has already changed its teaching on a number of the sexual issues discussed earlier.

When I am asked how I can stay in the church when the church has condemned me as a theologian, I can answer that **the church did not condemn me --the hierarchical magisterium did.** Yes, I was hurt by the action of the hierarchical magisterium, but I have received much support and solace from the broader Catholic theological community and from many of the people of God, who continue to nourish and support me in many ways.

Ironically, I play a greater role in the Catholic Church today than I would have had the Vatican not condemned me. After the Vatican action against me, a cartoon appeared in a daily newspaper that depicted, in the first frame, the pope saying he was silencing me as a Catholic theologian. The second frame showed me speaking before two dozen microphones! When Josef Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI, in April 2005, almost all of the major newspapers, news magazines, and national television networks interviewed me. I cannot imagine that this would have happened had the Vatican's condemnation not made me such a prominent public figure within the Church.

Spirituality for the Pilgrim Church

Many people urged me to accept the 1986 decision by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the pope and not to fight it. They thought it would be better for the Church and also enhance or deepen my own spirituality to leave it to the Spirit to right the wrongs of the church. The great theological heroes of Vatican II, John Courtney Murray and Yves Congar, had acted in this way, these people said. I disagreed.

I have always been attracted to a theology and spirituality based on the Paschal Mystery --the dying and rising of Jesus. Through our baptism we are incorporated into this mystery --we die in order to rise. In this life we will always know frustration, opposition, and failure. We are called to die in order to live.

I addressed this issue of spirituality in my book *The Crisis in Priestly Ministry* (1972), in which I used Yves Congar as a good example of the spirituality of the Paschal Mystery. When his diaries were published a few years ago, we learned even more about the anguish he suffered when he was relieved of his teaching function by church authorities, who also made it difficult for him to publish any works on controversial issues or to engage publicly in the ecumenical movement. He had earlier written of his anguish and suffering in light of the Paschal Mystery in *Chrétiens in dialogue* (1964), translated into English in 1966 as *Dialogue between Christians*, and in a short article he addressed to his brother priests in 1965. In the article, Congar, who had suffered in silence for many years, tried to encourage priests and others who were suffering and not seeing the fruits of their actions. Fortunately, Congar lived to see Vatican II and to hear Pope Paul VI say that no theologian had influenced him more deeply than Yves Congar.

But I raised some questions about Congar's approach. "Perhaps reform would have been achieved more quickly if he would have resisted more actively or perhaps even left his ministry. Perhaps such a spirituality is too passive and too easily accepts the imperfections and sinfulness of the institution and people in it. There are times when one cannot passively suffer, but must speak out boldly and resist the wrong that is being done. Congar himself realizes there is no meaning in suffering just for the sake of suffering. Although one might raise questions about Congar's response, one can only admire the man and his spirituality."

I also had theoretical problems with understanding the Paschal Mystery only in terms of paradox. Yes, at times we experience life in the midst of sorrow. But the Catholic tradition, with its emphasis on mediation, rejects the total paradoxical view of the Christian life. We also experience God's goodness in human goodness, God's joy in human joy, God's power in human power, God's truth in human truth. On both theoretical and practical grounds, therefore, I chose a different path. **The Catholic Church is as much my church as it is the pope's.** The pilgrim people of God will always experience the tensions and frustration of the journey, but we must strive to respect one another in our struggle and disagreements.

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- Social Teaching 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis
- The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis
- The Origins of Moral Theology in the United States
- **Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian.**