Magisterium and the Faithful

Author: Richard R. Gaillardetz

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:103626

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in America, vol. 207, no. 7, pp. 16-18, September 2012

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.
assistance of the Holy Spirit, organize complex realities like sexuality in terms of models and paradigms. Today neither magisterial teaching nor most moral theologians fully embrace the Angelic Doctor’s paradigm of “unnatural vice” (masturbation), a species of lust, contrary to both reason and the natural order and, after bestiality and sodomy, the “gravest sexual sin,” ranking ahead of, in descending order of gravity, incest, rape, adultery, seduction and fornication (ST II-II. Q. 154, art. 11-12). Masturbation’s violation of the sexual faculty’s sole primary procreative end made it seriously sinful. While there is a great deal of constancy in this procreative tradition, repeated by popes right up to Vatican II, “Gaudium et Spes” (No. 50) clearly shifted paradigms in elevating the unitive, love dimension of marriage to equal importance with procreation.

I then would have traced how the Catechism of the Catholic Church deepens this paradigm shift in affirming: “Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others” (No. 2332). Sexuality is the way our “belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed,” and it only “becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another” (No. 2337). Certainly the vocabulary and style differ from that of St. Thomas, but if he were alive today he could embrace both the substance and the mode of communication because they share his core belief that human interpersonal strivings for particular goods are grounded in our seeking the highest good, which is God.

Thomas’ theology did not begin ab ovo, nor did it simply repeat the well-worn truths of his tradition. Thomas’ approach of using the philosophy of Aristotle was a new “app” in his day. Some embraced it, but many resisted, while not a few regarded it with real suspicion. But ultimately St. Thomas succeeded in showing us that both constancy and change are necessarily bound together in a healthy and helpful living moral tradition. That tradition supports us still.


Magisterium and the Faithful
BY RICHARD GAILLARDETZ

The assessment in June of Sister Margaret A. Farley’s book Just Love by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith invites reflection on two issues that take us beyond the field of moral theology. The first concerns the task of theology as it relates to the distinctive teaching responsibilities of the magisterium, and the second concerns the contributions of ordinary Christians to the development of official church teaching.

The magisterium and the task of theology. The doctrinal congregation contends that Professor Farley “does not present a correct understanding of the role of the Church’s Magisterium” insofar as she either ignores official church teaching or treats it as “one opinion among others.” The congregation finds her theological method, attending as it does to “contemporary experience,” inconsistent with “the practice of authentic Catholic theology.” Unfortunately, these assertions give the impression that the “authentic” practice of Catholic moral theology is limited to defending and explicating the “constant teaching of the magisterium.” Yet the task of theology is not the same as the task of the magisterium. The congregation has a particular responsibility for ensuring the integrity of the apostolic faith and providing concrete moral guidance in the life of Christian discipleship.

Much of a theologian’s work can be supportive of the magisterium. Theologians will employ their craft to contribute to a deeper appropriation of the Christian tradition. They will find opportunities to probe Christianity’s fundamental doctrinal commitments for deeper insight. They will enhance the intelligibility and compelling character of the Christian moral vision. Most theologians find this aspect of their work quite fulfilling. They came to their vocation, after all, motivated by a passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the transformative potential of Christian discipleship. They are only too happy to put their expertise to the service of building up, wherever possible, the faith consciousness of the church. But the work of theology cannot be limited to this.

The task of theology may also require a critical exploration of perceived difficulties with current authoritative teaching. Theologians must be willing to shed light on faulty theological arguments; they must be willing to raise difficult questions regarding aspects of contemporary teachings that seem at variance with believers’ deepest intuitions and experiences. Should not the magisterium welcome this kind of honest inquiry as another form of theological cooperation with its own teaching responsibilities? After all, if the authoritative teaching under critique is in fact authentic, it should easily withstand this kind of inquiry. If it does not, then perhaps honest theological exploration will yield insights for a development or even a substantive change in the teaching.

The C.D.F. notification is disconcerting because it offers no appreciation for the critical exploratory function of theology. The notification draws attention to specific norms and doctrines that Professor Farley challenges—in
VATICAN II AFTER FIFTY YEARS
“DIALOGUE AND CATHOLIC IDENTITY”
October 11-12, 2012
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Speakers

**Keynote Lecture**

“Dialogue and the Identity of the Council”

JOHN W. O’MALLEY, S.J.
University Professor
Georgetown University

“Discovering Catholic Identity through Encounter with People of Other Religions”

ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL L. FITZGERALD, M.Afr.
Papal Nuncio to Egypt and Delegate to the League of Arab States Past President, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

**“Recollections of an Insider”**

THOMAS F. STRANSKY, C.S.P.
Original staff member and later consultant for the Secretariat for Christian Unity; past President of the Paulist Fathers and Rector of Tamur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem

“Catholic and Irrevocably Ecumenical”

CATHERINE CLIFFORD
Vice Dean and Associate Professor Faculty of Theology St. Paul University

**“Vatican II and the Synagogue’s Continuing Importance to the Church”**

ELENA PROCARIO-FOLEY
Brother John G. Driscoll Professor of Jewish-Catholic Studies Chair, Department of Religious Studies Iona College

“The Battle over Gaudium et Spes: Dialogue with the Modern World”

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI
Assistant Professor Department of Theology University of St. Thomas

This event is free and open to the public.
For registration and more information, contact Georgetown University, Washington, DC
www.georgetown.edu/vatican-ii-dialogue.html
their own religious experience, contemplation and reflection to participate in the development of tradition ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," No. 43). The council taught that all baptized Christians possess a supernatural instinct for the faith that allows them to penetrate ever more deeply the meaning of God’s word and to discern the appropriate application of that word in their lives ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 12). The council taught that the laity must willingly take the initiative in putting their faith into practice in their daily lives, seeking counsel from their clergy while recognizing that the clergy will not have an answer to every question that arises ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 8). Put simply, the council treated the Christian faithful as adults.

In its 2011 document “Theology Today: Perspectives and Criteriа,” the International Theological Commission held that both theologians and the magisterium must attend carefully to the sensus fidelium (No. 35–36) in the exercise of their respective tasks. Theologians like Professor Farley and Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., have made attending to

The council taught that ordinary believers can draw on their own religious experience, contemplation and reflection to participate in the development of tradition ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," No. 43). The council taught that all baptized Christians possess a supernatural instinct for the faith that allows them to penetrate ever more deeply the meaning of God’s word and to discern the appropriate application of that word in their lives ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 12). The council taught that the laity must willingly take the initiative in putting their faith into practice in their daily lives, seeking counsel from their clergy while recognizing that the clergy will not have an answer to every question that arises ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 8). Put simply, the council treated the Christian faithful as adults.

In its 2011 document “Theology Today: Perspectives and Criteriа,” the International Theological Commission held that both theologians and the magisterium must attend carefully to the sensus fidelium (No. 35–36) in the exercise of their respective tasks. Theologians like Professor Farley and Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., have made attending to

Why did it make no effort to engage seriously the larger argument she was trying to make? The fact is that relatively little of Professor Farley’s book deals with masturbation, homosexual activity and the other church teachings she is accused of challenging.

The bulk of Just Love makes an extended argument for a new framework for sexual ethics, one that attends more fully to contemporary human experience and the fruit of social scientific inquiry. Professor Farley makes the provocative argument that Christian sexual ethics would look quite different if it were shaped by the concerns for just relationship that are central to Catholic social ethics. It is this new theological framework that represents the heart of her project. Yet the notification makes no mention of this framework. Indeed, it makes no effort at all to consider her arguments. Perhaps the C.D.F. did not see this as an appropriate task for a doctrinal assessment; but then one must ask, where does the magisterium strive to engage diverse theological arguments that may challenge official teaching?

Many moral theologians find Professor Farley’s line of argument compelling. Others are troubled by the direction in which her work would take contemporary sexual ethics. The pertinent question is whether the kind of tentative theological proposals she has offered can play a helpful role in the ongoing development of doctrine. Can her new ethical framework provide an occasion for the whole Christian community, including its bishops, to prayerfully consider new questions and concerns regarding Christian sexual morality? This brings us to the second issue.

Attending to the insights of ordinary believers. The C.D.F. notification expresses concern that Professor Farley’s book will create “confusion among the faithful.” Indeed, we find similar concerns expressed in almost every doctrinal notification of this kind in the past decade. This kind of language seems tainted by an ecclesiastical paternalism that assumes the Christian faithful are necessarily scandalized whenever theologians raise difficult questions regarding official church teaching. Is it not well past time for church leadership to attend to the Second Vatican Council’s teaching that the people of God are more than naïve, impressionable children who need to be protected?

The council taught that ordinary believers can draw on their own religious experience, contemplation and reflection to participate in the development of tradition ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," No. 43). The council taught that all baptized Christians possess a supernatural instinct for the faith that allows them to penetrate ever more deeply the meaning of God’s word and to discern the appropriate application of that word in their lives ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 12). The council taught that the laity must willingly take the initiative in putting their faith into practice in their daily lives, seeking counsel from their clergy while recognizing that the clergy will not have an answer to every question that arises ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," No. 8). Put simply, the council treated the Christian faithful as adults.

In its 2011 document “Theology Today: Perspectives and Criteriа,” the International Theological Commission held that both theologians and the magisterium must attend carefully to the sensus fidelium (No. 35–36) in the exercise of their respective tasks. Theologians like Professor Farley and Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., have made attending to

What would happen if the magisterium were to view the faithful as collaborators within a community of discernment?

the religious experience of ordinary believers central to their projects. Where is there evidence of the magisterium’s efforts in this regard?

What would happen if the magisterium were to view the faithful as the council did, that is, as collaborators within a community of discernment, in which the Christian faithful’s own wealth of experience and religious insight might have something positive to offer to the development of Christian moral teaching? What would happen if the magisterium were to view theologians as serving the teaching office of the church by challenging faulty arguments, raising difficult questions and proposing alternative frameworks for the church’s prayerful discernment? What would happen if theologians and the rest of the faithful were to attend seriously to official magisterial teaching with an attitude of respect but with a determination to test its adequacy in the light of their own insight and intuitions? Perhaps the church would become a more authentic school of humble Christian discipleship, one better equipped to offer the world the liberating message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

RICHARD GAILLARDETZ is the McCarthy Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College. His most recent publication, co-authored with Catherine Clifford, is Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II (Liturgical Press, 2012). He is also the editor of a collection of essays titled When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today’s Church (Liturgical Press, 2012).