

Chapter 35

The Bark of Peter in Stormy Seas (1976-89)

This final chapter begins with a quick summary of some themes of previous chapters. Vatican II, with its ecumenical bent, had been a challenge to Catholic identity. Catholics had often defined themselves over against non-Catholics and non-Christians and now they are asked to see others in a different light - brethren in a divided church and/or fellow members of the Kingdom. They are now encouraged to enter into dialogue, not necessarily to convert, but perhaps even to learn from those outside the Church.

Since Vatican II, Catholic identity has also been challenged by a decline in Catholic schools, growth in mixed marriages, the alienation of many from the Church over the birth-control issue and the sheer magnitude of the numbers leaving the priesthood. It was into these stormy seas that Pope John Paul II was to captain the Bark of Peter.

The Polish Pope

John Paul II was the choice of Paul VI. He was seen as a theological moderate and a social and ecumenical liberal. He has committed himself to the task of the ecumenical movement and restoring union with the Orthodox. His encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* acknowledged the stumbling block of papal authority and asked Protestants for advice. He has apologized to Protestants and Jews for past failures on the part of Catholics (not the Church). He went so far as to recognize the good effects of the Reformation in directing the reformation of the Catholic Church and even the papacy.

He has been a strong supporter of the Church's social teachings, has marked the Church's new position against the death penalty and has voiced strong opposition to war as a solutions to modern quarrels among nations. He has also been a strong supporter of modern science - with formal apologies to Gallileo.

Thus, in matters outside the Church, John Paul II might be called a progressive, however concerning internal matters he will go down in history as a pope who was dedicated to "restoration". This is a restoration of pre-Vatican II traditions that seem to be threatened by such notions as collegiality and freedom of conscience that were the hallmarks of Vatican II's fresh look at the Church.

To assist in the task of restoration he has appointed conservative bishops and appointed Cardinal Ratzinger to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formally the Inquisition). Ratzinger has put a damper on ecumenical efforts and has again mounted an attack on modern theologians that echoes the Modernist Crisis, an attack that many note lacks a process of due process that is expected in modern society.

Rome has also required theologians teaching in Catholic institutions to approach the local bishop and receive a *mandatum* to teach. The bishop is supposed to ascertain the orthodoxy of the theologian. In the judgment of many, central authority figures in the

Church have gone from “accentuate the positive” to “accentuate the negative”.

Theological Dissent

Theological dissent is a mixed bag and has been seen and treated in various ways throughout the history of the Church. Some who have voiced theological dissent have been judged as heretics and their theories rightly condemned. However, every heresy contains a grain of truth and in some instances heresies have played a providential role in the clarification of the Church’s understanding of revealed truth.

The heresy of Arius led the Church in the Council of Nicea in 325 to define that the Son is of the same substance as the Father. The heresies of Nestorius and the Monophysites were the occasions for the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) to clarify that in Jesus there was one person and two natures. The errors of Pelagius (350-424) led the Church to clarify its teachings on original sin and the necessity of grace to lead a moral life. And St. Augustine gives us this reminder, “Do not believe, brethren, that heresies are produced by insignificant souls! Only great men have produced heresies”.

Looking back to the Inquisition and our earlier consideration of the Modernist Crisis, the treatment of dissenters has often been harsh. True, the Church must be protected from real or imagined distortions of the truth, but the “grain of truth” offered by these dissenters was often not recognized or developed. Furthermore, all people need to be treated with respect and fairness. Even those who once accepted the old adage “error has no rights” ought to concede that even if that is true it does not follow that those individuals who may indeed be in error have no rights.

Certainly the magisterium of the Church (pope, bishops) is charged with teaching and protecting the divine Truth - the mystery of God in our lives. However, no single person or group of persons possesses the divine Truth. It is the Truth that possess us and our formulations of the Truth, infallible or not, cannot hope to contain its mystery, a mystery which transcends our power of understanding and our capacity of expression. We may indeed say things that are true, but they are never the whole truth. A humble attentiveness should always mark the official Church’s approach to those who seek the truth on our common journey into the mystery of God. This has not always been the case.

Certainly, our faith demands a personal commitment to the truth, however, personal commitment to one’s faith without a spirit of open inquiry - an expectation of finding something new - can be tragic. As Ian Barbour notes: “Commitment without inquiry tends toward fanaticism or narrow dogmatism” (*Religion and Science* p.135). We in the Catholic tradition have not totally escaped this tragic situation. Our theological search must be a true search. We must expect the unexpected.

Avery Dulles, in his book, *Models of the Church*, makes this observation:

In Roman Catholic theology since the Counter Reformation the prevalent view of revelation has been strongly colored by the institutional view of the Church. The Church is understood as the guardian and conservator of revelation. As an authoritative teacher, the Church is compared to a schoolmaster -- except that, unlike most schoolmasters, the Church teaches by the authority of office, rather than by giving evidence for what it says. To accept the word of the Church is an act of obedience to divinely constituted officers....

Catholic faith was understood as an implicit confidence in the teaching office, and the test of orthodoxy was a man's readiness to believe whatever the Church might teach for the very reason that the Church was teaching it. (pp.167-68)

In the November, 1974 issue of *Commonweal*, Daniel Maguire spoke of the difficulties experienced by many moral theologians seeking new insights into moral theology:

His (the moral theologian's) work was often hamstrung by an oracular hierarchical magisterium whose authority was sustained by a reductively magical use of the theological notion of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, implying *ex officio* powers of discernment. (p.143)

We see this same "logic" in the movement of "restoration" initiated by John Paul II. The "logic" of this thinking is that the Church has duly appointed teachers - bishops and pope - and that these are guided by the Holy Spirit and thus their teachings, especially those of long standing and of general agreement, must be believed because of their source - divinely guided teachers. Any student of Aristotelian logic would understand that the conclusion is not warranted by the premises.

Using this "logic", dissent to magisterial teachings, especially by theologians and/or laypersons, is often considered a threat to the truths of faith. Of course, sometimes dissenters are indeed in error and pose a real threat to the truths of faith. However, this is not always the case and the history of the Church is replete with dissenters who have been repressed by the Church and later have become the architects of new theological insights adopted by the Church. The documents of Vatican II contain the thinking of many a theologian whose writings were suppressed by authorities in the Church. And, again, dissenters who are in error usually have that "grain of truth" imbedded in their error that at least ought to be considered. Exploration and dialogue rather than suppression should be the rule.

A major theological debate in modern times concerns the non-infallible teachings of the magisterium. First of all, what do we understand by the word magisterium? In Catholic thought the Latin word *magisterium* originally meant the role and authority of one who was a "master" in various areas. Over time this term has come to mean a teacher and speaks to the special kind of teaching authority that is conferred by the sacrament of episcopal ordination and that authorizes the pope and the Catholic bishops to teach in the

name of Christ on matters of faith and morals.

The question at hand involves the kind of assent due to the ordinary teachings of the magisterium. In theological jargon these teachings are designated as “authoritative, but non-infallible”. They constitute the ordinary, day-to-day teaching of the Church. They are to be given a presumption of truth based on the fact that the pope and bishops are the teachers (magisterium) of the Church and enjoy the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Certainly most theologians would grant that this presumption is warranted.

We discussed in previous chapters how a doctrine taught by the magisterium and held for centuries - the denial of religious liberty - could be reversed as it was in Vatican II. Those who spoke in favor of the concept of religious liberty (John Courtney Murray) prior to Vatican II were warned, silenced and their writings suppressed. Later, this concept of religious liberty became a central point in Vatican II’s teaching on religious liberty - a true development of doctrine, again aided by the Holy Spirit in whose name all Councils are convened. In this case the Holy Spirit had a great deal to overcome from its otherwise loyal defenders.

We also noted in previous chapters how, in its *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, the Council, in teaching of the formation of conscience in moral matters, discarded the wording “ought to form their consciences *according to* (italics mine) the teachings of the church” and in its place substituted “in the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully *to attend to* (italics mine) the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.” Thus leaving some room for responsible dissent.

This raised the question: What is responsible dissent? In answer to this question, the U.S. bishops in a pastoral letter “Human Life in Our Day” (1968) spoke of dissent as legitimate under three conditions: 1) it is based on serious reasons; 2) it is respectful of teaching authority; and 3) it does not cause scandal.

Not too bad, but notice what it did not say. It did not say that dissent is often valuable, or dissenters often bring forth important truths, or dissent has often resulted in authentic development of doctrine and that dissent may indeed be at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and thus prophetic in nature. Dissenters are often true prophets and prophets have never had an easy time.

Interestingly enough, Pope John Paul II has spoken in positive terms about the need for trust and openness in the Church. In his apostolic letter of Jan. 6, 2001 entitled *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of the New Millennium), he stressed the need for the Church to realize more fully its nature as a communion by declaring that communion “embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the church” and concludes by stating: “The spirituality of communion, by prompting a *trust and openness* (italics mine) wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the people of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.”

In reality, however, this trust and openness of and toward the Church’s theologians has

not been too evident. In practice, the tendency has been to revert to a pre-Vatican II mentality which views any dissent as unacceptable.

Revolution in Moral Theology

The revolution in moral theology has many causes. One important reason for a rethinking of moral discernment was Vatican II's teaching that Christ's prophetic (teaching) office is shared by the entire Church. The role of the laity in the discernment of truth in faith and morals is distinct from the official magisterium, but it is real nevertheless. Vatican II made it clear that the gift of the Spirit of Truth is a gift to the entire people, not just its leaders.

Another cause is the growing complexity of modern life. New issues in business ethics, bioethics, etc. are cropping up at an accelerated rate and moral theologians need new ways to evaluate these issues.

However, the real flashpoint for moral discussion in the time between Vatican II and now was the birth control debate generated by the publication, in 1968, of Paul VI's encyclical *Humane Vitae*, which condemned all forms of artificial contraception. There were three issues at the heart of the debate: 1) the formulation of natural law theory, 2) the possibility of development in official moral teachings and 3) the issue of legitimate dissent concerning non-infallible teachings of the magisterium.

As background, it is well to note that the history of official views about human sexuality has had a long and unfortunate history in the Catholic moral teaching - official and unofficial. From the fifth century on, sexual intercourse between married couples was justified only if the intention was to generate children and even then the pleasure experienced was judged by many theologians to be at least venially sinful. For St. Augustine (5th cent.) sexuality was equated with lust and he suggested that sexual intercourse was the physical vehicle through which original sin was transmitted. Some say this was a personal reaction to his experience of having two mistresses and one illegitimate son. Later theologians considered contraceptive attempts to be on the same moral plane as murder.

A vocation to the married state was seen as a lesser Christian vocation than virginity. The C. of Trent in 1563 said "If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema."

In the interests of brevity, we shall only discuss the issue of the formulation of natural law. The other two issues have been covered in previous chapters of our text.

Natural Law Theory - Natural law theory was adopted from the Greeks and Romans by St. Thomas in the 13th century and it became the main basis for Catholic moral teaching down to the present. It is based on human reason and the presumption that human nature is in some sense normative for human action. In other words, human acts that contribute

of human flourishing are good and those that attack true human life are bad.

Natural law thinking began with the Greeks and was then filtered through Roman thought. In the first century BC, Cicero spoke of natural law as the innate power of reason to direct human action. In the first century AD, Gaius spoke of the *jus civile* which regulated and was peculiar to individual nations and *jus gentium* which was common to all peoples, because of their common nature.

In the third century BC, a third type of natural law was introduced by the Roman jurist Ulpian. He spoke of the *jus naturale* - what nature taught animals. It was a generic rule of action common to humans and animals. It identified human nature with animal structures, tendencies and behaviors. Ulpian isolated this type of natural law from the other two. It had its own purposes and “laws” without any relationship to either *jus civile* or *jus gentium*. This had unfortunate and lasting effects on the Catholic understanding of natural law especially relative to the birth control issue. Richard Gula in *Reason Informed by Faith* analyses this effect for Catholic moral thinking:

Natural law (in Catholic thought) now takes on a physicalist cast whereby the natural moral order becomes identified with the properties, operations, and goals of the “natural” or given structures of physical, animal life.

According to such a view, the moral act becomes identified with the physical act which corresponds to animal processes. Moral obligation arises from what is already prescribed in the physical structures of being human apart from their relation to the totality of the person, which includes such aspects as reason, freedom, affections and relationships. Moral evaluations, as a result, become based on the integrity and purpose of physical actions taken apart from the totality of the person.

This “physicalist cast” tended to condition Catholic moral analysis to emphasize, or even to absolutize, the physical and biological aspects of the human person and human actions independently of the more inclusive social, spiritual and psychological dimensions of human life.

Looking at natural law this way, official Catholic moral thinking reasoned that artificial contraception interfered with a natural, physical process which was structured for procreation and thus was morally wrong, period, without any other human circumstances considered. While classical natural law theory had considered moral acts that contributed to the overall well-being of humans to be good, this restricted notion of “natural” tended to define what it meant to be human solely in physical and biological terms.

Modern Catholic moralists tried to recapture the classical Greek notions and to look at human moral acts within the entire context of human relationships. They wanted to discover “what works” for human beings in the particular circumstances of their individual and social lives. *Humane Vitae* had adopted the restricted, physicalist approach to human sexuality leaving out all other circumstantial considerations. It was also based

on the long held proposition that procreation was the primary end of conjugal love and if this physical, procreative process was artificially frustrated, it frustrated the natural law (in Ulpian's sense) and was therefore evil. This reasoning was the fundamental basis for the massive theological dissent that followed *Humane Vitae*.

The Context of Dissent from *Humane Vitae*

Some dissenters judged that *Humane Vitae* was more of an effort to protect the authority of traditional, official teaching than an effort to discover the truth of the moral values involved. Others stressed that the natural law is not to be envisioned as some kind of preexisting, eternal ethical code existing above and beyond human experience and imposed from the outside. It is rather a process of reasoned discovery of what contributes to the flourishing of human life taken as a whole, including, but not limited to, its physical structure and functioning.

Others viewed the historical process that led up to *Humane Vitae* as justification for legitimate dissent. If indeed, Pius XI and Pius XII had settled the matter in their encyclicals and, therefore, if no dissent or discussion was possible concerning this authoritative teaching (as conservatives claimed), then why did two other popes establish papal commissions (see below) even to discuss the issue if the matter was beyond dispute?

In outline, the historical process went like this:

1) In reaction to the Protestant's limited approval of contraceptives at the Lambeth Conference in 1930, Pius XI immediately issued his encyclical *Casti Connubi* (pure marriage). He condemned contraception, but said that the mutual love of husband and wife was a good and a secondary end of marriage. He also allowed intercourse during menopause and the infertile period without explicitly endorsing the use of the rhythm method. This positive affirmation of conjugal love inspired moral theologians to consider the significance of marital love in assessing the morality of contraception.

2) In 1951, Pius XII in his Address to Italian Catholic Midwives, conceded that in seeking and enjoying sexual love, "couples do nothing wrong". He went on to stress that procreation is still the primary end of marriage and while the rhythm method could be used, it must be with good cause and not simply to satisfy sensuality.

3) Again, in 1951, Pius XII in his Address to National Congress of the Family Front and Association of Large Families expressed his sympathy with the real difficulties of marriage and widened the limits of rhythm. And then remarked: "One may even hope...that science will succeed in providing this licit method with a sufficiently secure basis." This somewhat ambiguous remark set moral theologians and scientists to wondering whether science was being encouraged to simply stabilize the infertile period or perhaps scientifically extend it.

4) In 1960 the United States F.D.A. approved "the pill". One of the three scientists who

developed the pill was John Rock, a devout Catholic - complete with five children, nineteen grandchildren and a crucifix over his desk. He attended daily Mass nearly all his adult life. He thought he had a “natural” solution for birth control. After ovulation the body naturally produces progesterone to prepare the uterus for implantation and stops ovaries from releasing new eggs. When a woman is pregnant her body produces progesterin to suppress ovulation. Rock’s natural solution was progesterin in pill form. He thought he had an answer for Pius XII. According to the Church, he did not.

5) Vatican II did not deal directly with the contraceptive issue. However, it did speak of marriage as a covenant of conjugal love, not just a contract. On one occasion it seems that Paul VI asked the council to explicitly repeat the statements of Pius XI and Pius XII on birth control. The Council declined and only stated that Catholics “may not undertake methods of regulating procreation that are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church” (*Church in the Modern World* n. 51). There was no discussion about which methods were considered blameworthy.

In the last session of the Council, three cardinals and the Melkite patriarch addressed the Council Fathers and called for a change in the official teaching, they received spontaneous applause from a majority of the assembled bishops. The *Council Daybook* reported that the applause was the most enthusiastic in three years of the Council.

The eighty-seven-year-old Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV Saigh was from the Eastern Rite which allows married clergy. Here, in part, is what he said:

The faithful are reduced to living outside the law of the Church, far from the sacraments, in constant anguish, unable to find a working solution between two contradictory imperatives, conscience and normal conjugal life....

The purpose of marriage, therefore, must not be dissected into primary and secondary purposes...Do we not have the right to ask ourselves whether certain official positions are not subordinated to obsolete conceptions and possibly to the psychosis of bachelors who are strangers to this sector of life?

There seemed to be a strong desire for change among the Council Fathers. However, that same day Paul VI removed it from consideration by the Council and recommended it to an already standing commission set up by John XXIII.

Earlier, urged by Cardinal Suenens, John XXIII had established the “Pontifical Commission of the Study of Population, Family, and Births.” At first it consisted of only six members with no theologians. In its second meeting in 1964 it considered “the pill”. Paul VI then added two sociologists and five theologians.

6) When the Council Fathers were informed of the Commission, they called for an expansion of the commission to fifty-five and a meeting was scheduled in March, 1965.

Thirty-four lay men and women, nine members of the secular clergy and twelve members of religious orders were appointed. A distinguished group of professors and two bishops also attended. Interestingly, Dr. John Rock was not included.

7) For the fifth and final session of the Commission (1966) the pope added fourteen cardinals and bishops. When the theologians were asked on a trial vote to evaluate the teachings of Pius XI on the intrinsic evil of contraception and whether the teaching could be changed, the vote was 15-4 for change on both counts. Ten days later a vote was taken on the question: “whether all contraception was intrinsically evil?”. Of the bishops present 9 said no, 3 yes, and 3 abstained. When the final report came out, the full Commission voted overwhelmingly to accept a change and allow some form of artificial birth control.

A majority report (favoring change) and a minority report were sent to Paul VI.

8) There followed a long, two-year wait, then on July 29, 1968 Pope Paul VI finally issued his encyclical *Humane Vitae* with its statement that “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life”. Paul VI had ignored the development of doctrine among the theologians, the sentiment of the Council Fathers and had rejected his own birth control Commission’s recommendations.

9) When the *Humane Vitae* was introduced, Msgr. Lambruschini, the official Vatican spokesman for the encyclical said:

Most of the theologians, while admitting that the magisterium can define infallibly some of the aspects of natural law explicitly or implicitly contained in revelation, consider that this has not come to pass in the field of morals. Attentive reading of the encyclical *Humane Vitae* does not suggest the theological note of infallibility...It is not infallible. (*Catholic Mind* 66, no. 1225, Sept. 1968: 545-55)

The pronouncement has come. It is not infallible, but it does not leave the question concerning birth regulation in a condition of vague problematics. The assent of faith is due only to the definitions properly so called (infallible), but there is owed also loyal and full assent, interior and not only exterior to an authentic pronouncement of the magisterium, in proportion to the level of the authority from which it emanates - which in this case is the supreme authority of the Supreme Pontiff - and its object, which is most weighty since it is a matter of the tormented question of the regulation of births. (Vatican press release)

While these statements cleared up the matter of infallibility, it did not solve the crucial question of the kind of assent due to non-infallible pronouncements. Conservatives understood this to mean the matter was closed forever and no change could ever be possible. Others disagreed and asked what is the real difference between infallible and non-infallible statements of popes relative to the possibility of dissent. What is the difference, if any, between the “assent of faith” due to infallible statements and “loyal

and full assent” due to non-infallible statements of which Lambruschini spoke? If there is no practical difference, then why make the distinction?

The reaction to the encyclical was immediate and strong. Many laymen, priests, religious, theologians, and bishops could not believe what had happened. The history of the dissent that followed is too long and complicated to outline here. The debate among theologians has finally abated and polls show that most Catholic lay persons feel free to make the decision on their own. Overall, it was and is a severe blow to the credibility of the authority of the pope. The Church had certainly erred on teachings about morals before, and many felt it had happened again.

The burning question remained: Is it possible to change a clear and authoritative, albeit non-infallible, papal teaching concerning morals?

Lambruschini had stated (see above) the theological opinion that the morality of birth-control was to be judged on the principles of natural law and that while it was possible for a pope to speak infallibly in the area of morals, none had ever done so.

We have discussed the critique of a narrow, physicalist conception of natural law. The remaining issue is whether or not the authoritative teaching could change.

While the Church is traditionally reluctant to admit it has ever been wrong or changed its teachings, history records that it has been wrong and has changed its teachings. Besides those doctrinal developments we have noted before in these chapters, the Church has also been wrong and has changed its teachings - often long-standing teachings - in a number of important areas concerning morality - the obvious area of contention in the birth-control debate.

A few examples: Pope St. Gregory the Great (6th cent.) had condemned pleasure in marital intercourse, reflecting centuries of theological opinion. Innocent IV (13th cent.) approved the condemnation of witches and the use of torture in judicial interrogations. The most obvious change in a long standing moral stance in the Church was the issue of slavery. From the 4th century until the 19th century, popes, councils and the Holy Office had defended and at times encouraged and even participated in slavery. It was defended as moral - not contrary to natural or divine law - by the Holy Office as late as 1866, even after it had been abolished in the U.S..

Can long standing, authoritative moral stances of the Church change? They can and have. Will the Church’s official condemnation of artificial birth-control change? Time will tell.

The Ecumenical Movement

The time after Vatican II was a time of widespread ecumenical activity. Catholics were catching up, so to speak. Protestants had formally begun the ecumenical movement in 1910 at Edinburgh. There they had confessed that “our divisions were contrary to the will of Christ” and professed that “a unity in Christ and fellowship in the Spirit is deeper

than our divisions”.

Initial Catholic reaction was negative. Pius XI in *Mortalium Animos*, on “fostering religious union” (1928), was of the opinion that Catholic participation in the Ecumenical Movement would give the impression that one church was as good as another. Reunion in the mind of Pius XI meant the return of Protestants to the true Church of Christ, the Catholic Church. He did not leave open many options for Protestants.

Obviously, this attitude was completely reversed at Vatican II. Now dialogue takes place on all levels - the pope, bishops, theologians and the laity. Agreement on several important Reformation issues have been reached by Catholics and Protestants, but several important doctrinal points are still unresolved - papal primacy, the question of valid orders and Marian dogmas.

Some important theologians, e.g., Karl Rahner, have suggested that enough doctrinal unity exists for substantive reunion to take place now. Others, e.g., Avery Dulles, disagree. Still others point out that while many doctrinal issues have been addressed and resolved, little has been accomplished in the area of ethics - abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, active homosexuality, premarital sex, women’s rights, just war theories and, of course, birth control. These are most difficult because many of these issues are not yet fully resolved even within the Catholic community itself.

The great protestant theologian, Oscar Cullman, has suggested that any possibility of real unity would demand that the various Christian churches would have to retain many of their distinctive characteristics or “charisms” (gifts) as Cullman describes them. We noted earlier that John Paul II has entertained such an idea in *Ut Unum Sint*.

My own simple view, undoubtedly too simple, is that Christian Churches need to change their primary focus from Church to Jesus. Another great protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, warned against making anything other than God our “ultimate concern”. When that happens we have created an idol. If the Church, and all that goes with it - popes, dogmas, doctrines, ethics, buildings -, becomes our ultimate concern, then the Church has become an idol. Jesus said nothing about building up an institutional church, but he said a great deal about building up the Kingdom of God. The Church is not an end in itself, but is called to be the sacramental presence of Jesus in the world, commissioned to continue of work of Jesus - announcing and building up the Kingdom of God.

The model for ecumenism that is my favorite is to picture a large wheel with spokes. The spokes are the churches and the axle receptacle in the middle is Jesus. The God revealed to us in Jesus is our “ultimate concern”. If all the churches focus on Jesus and draw closer to Him, they may well wake up one day and find themselves together. Perhaps we have made being a Christian too complex and we have come close to making our churches idols. Just a thought.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology had its beginnings in Latin America in an effort to emancipate oppressed peoples from unjust political, economic and/or social subjugation. Its ideological roots included the strong legacy of Catholic social thought imbedded in the social encyclicals and Vatican II's challenge to the Church to make it own the "joys, hopes, griefs and aspirations of humanity, and especially the poor" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, note 1). Its original ideas were also influenced by the social and political theories of scholars with a Marxist bent.

There are four major themes in liberation theology:

- 1) **A preferential option for the poor.** This includes a commitment to become actively involved with the poor in their struggle for justice.
- 2) **The unity of theory and practice.** Harking back to Jesus, they see the test of discipleship as those who not only hear the word of God, but do the will of God (Mt.12:46-50; Mk. 3:31-35). Social justice is not solely the venue of philosophers and theologians, but also, and necessarily so, that of political activists.
- 3) **Ideological critique.** This is a prophetic role of criticizing oppressive systems of economics, politics and culture and replacing them with systems that liberate the oppressed.
- 4) **Looking to Scripture.** Liberation theology stressed God as the God of liberation in the OT and with a special preference for the poor as exemplified by Jesus in the NT. The OT themes of liberation were seen as included the Exodus and the prophetic critiques of Amos and Isaiah. The ministry of Jesus is clearly seen as a ministry to the poor and the outcasts of society.

There has been a great deal of controversy about the various forms of liberation theology. Rome warned of borrowing too much from Marx (class struggle) and becoming too involved in politics and military action, especially the clergy. The identification of the local hierarchy of the Church with the privileged class was seen as a threat to their rightful authority.

On the other hand, Pope John Paul II, in a 1986 letter to the Brazilian bishops, affirmed the "useful and necessary" character of liberation theology.

Liberation theology has evolved to include the concerns of women, in and outside the Church, and the concerns of minorities. These are large and important issues for the Church and it has only begun to address them.

For the problems of Church and for all humanity there is always hope, for we believe that we are not alone. Jesus revealed to us a God who has only one purpose - that we might have life and life in abundance - and that same Jesus has risen from the dead and is with us now. In the Father we are created to be one family, in the Son it has been revealed to us how to live as such and in the Spirit we find our ability to discern the Word of God

and the strength do it.

The Church has been given the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit calls in many wonderful ways and the Church must always be open to its promptings, even when it comes from unlikely prophets. The same Spirit also confronts the Church, not to condemn its sins and errors, but to offer it life. *Deo gratias.*