

On Democracy and Doctrine

by the Rev. Paul Mankowski, S.J.

(an excerpt from a forthcoming essay, "Women and the Bishops" to appear in the November 1990 issue of *First Things*.)

"One in Christ Jesus" should stand as proof positive to the American episcopacy that corporate direction of its own teaching has been all but broken by the strategy of the past two decades. After seven years, two drafts, and several changes of committee, we are presented with a pastoral letter on the concerns of Catholic women wherein Mother Teresa's gift to the Church does not earn a mention, while the social analysis of Anne Wilson Schaefer does.

Some scholars of more sanguine temperament have maintained that there is no great cause for concern about this pastoral letter, since it will be "saved from significance" by its bulk and sheer unreadability. Yet the fact that it was produced at all points to some trends whose import is not so lightly dismissed. Shortly before his death, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar remarked, "The decentralization of the Roman curia has led directly to the curialization of the diocese." Concomitant with this shift has been a huge increase in the bureaucratic size and complexity of the national episcopal conferences—the US Catholic Conference and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops employ 292 people in the central headquarters—and a corresponding swell of documentation. In the time from 1982 through 1988, the NCCB published 226 papers—44 in the last year alone.

There is at present a dispute among Catholic theologians about the theological status of episcopal conferences. The key question is: to what extent can a body of bishops assembled on the basis of political geography claim to speak with the doctrinal authority of the Church? I do not propose to offer an opinion on the subject, but it should be stressed that, whatever the right answer should be, its solution must assume that the bishops in question are able to read those propositions which they will be required to endorse. Yet how many of the nearly 400 US bishops could have read more than a fraction of the 44

papers issued in their name in 1988? The basis for making a particular judgment is not here at issue; the question is whether it is humanly possible for a bishop to know what he is asked to say "yes" to.

Is there a substantive sense in which the US bishops, as a body, still have control over the theology which is taught in their name? Before answering in the affirmative, there are several considerations which should give us pause. First, the number and size of the documents which the bishops have taken upon themselves to produce make it impossible that more than a small percentage of them should have an active hand in the writing of any single paper; since the bishops delegated to a given project recruit writers of diverse ability to help them, results at the committee level are often shaky. Still a bishop may reluctantly consent to a bad paper because the alternative scenarios are even worse.

Second, the complexities of single projects are magnified exponentially at the level of national consideration, where several documents are up for approval at the same time. Two factors are at work here. On one hand, the tiny ration of actual time for debate to the number of pages under discussion makes adequate analysis impossible. There is no way an American bishop can study the sentences he is asked to endorse. The way the bishops have chosen to speak on issues of immediate topical interest increases the pressure for a hasty decision, rather than lengthy and sober scrutiny.

Third, the structure of majority consent breeds among the bishops a "dynamic of collegial dialogue"—in plain English: cutting deals. A man may feel compelled to approve three documents he finds defective in exchange for a vote for one project which he believes more important. Since most documents are approved or rejected *in toto*, this greatly increases the chance of bad doctrine winning episcopal sanction.

Finally, the semi-public nature of the drafting pro-

cess and the fact that documents are released prior to voting means that the true impact of the bishops' theology may be considerably different from what they intend. Few people will deny that the secular media can grossly distort the Church's message by arbitrary distribution of emphasis, yet the procedure now in place ensures that any journalist who wishes has the opportunity to do just that. This is bad enough for those documents which the bishops decide or approve; it is *a fortiori* harmful in the case of those they don't.

In short, the picture does not inspire confidence. The bureaucracy of the USCC was conceived as a tool which would help the bishops spread their teaching; it has burgeoned into a policy-making machine with its own ideas of what the Church should be saying and which the bishops have found progressively difficult to control. Similarly, the decision to speak as bishops in the public sphere on issues of technical controversy and partisan dispute was intended to increase the contribution of the Church's wisdom to civil discourse. It is arguable that the

major political parties have changed the beliefs of Catholics more profoundly in the past twenty years than the Church has changed the beliefs of either politicians or Catholics. Several bishops have had to promulgate independent statements in the past few years precisely to counteract those of the USCC; Vatican interventions to rescue bishops from theological solecism are increasingly frequent.

Doctrinal control can be salvaged, provided the resolve necessary to make some major changes is quickened. "One in Christ Jesus" is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the regnant philosophy of management, and its flaws are so glaring that they point the way out of the morass: less Pop Psych, more of the Gospel; less paper, more scrutiny; fewer words, and those more carefully chosen. The course ahead requires discipline, imagination and spine. We may hope that our pastors will find it worth the effort.

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