

'We cannot put our heads in the sand'

Charles Curran | Sep. 7, 2010



Fr. Charles E. Curran (Yiu Sing Luke Chan)

The following are remarks made by Fr. Charles E. Curran, Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University, at the closing of a July 24-27 gathering of moral theologians in Trent, Italy. (See [story](#)[1].)

This has been an extraordinary meeting of 600 Catholic moral theologians from all over the world that has contributed much to the development of Catholic moral theology. Thanks to the meeting at Padua [Italy] four years ago and this meeting now, the process of dialogue and interchange has been growing.

Both the understanding of the Church Catholic and of moral theology recognizes the need and importance of such dialogue and interchange. By definition, the Church Catholic is a big church, having room for both saints and sinners, people of all races and colors and languages, and people living in all parts of the world. Less than a century ago, moral theology was primarily a European enterprise, and moral theologians in Europe were in somewhat regular contact with one another through their writings. The fact that the textbooks were all in Latin made this communication even easier. But today, moral theology is done on every continent. Since Catholic moral theologians belong to a worldwide church, it is absolutely essential for moral theologians to learn from one another and to be in dialogue.

Moral theology today recognizes the role of social location as affecting all of us. We are finite individuals and are always limited because we exist in one space and culture and one particular time. We have become more conscious of this reality in the last few decades. We white Catholic moral theologians in the United States have rightly been criticized for our abysmal failure to recognize the evil of racism in our country and our church, and the consequent white privilege that we enjoy. Catholic feminists have reminded us of the patriarchy that continues to exist in our church and our society. Liberation theologians have recalled for us God's preferential option for the poor and the need for this to be an important hermeneutic principle in Catholic social ethics. Thus the type of dialogue and interchange taking place in this meeting is important for Catholic moral theology. We all owe a great debt of gratitude to [Jesuit Fr.] James Keenan [of Boston College] and the other people who have worked tirelessly to organize this meeting.

As I listened to our discussions of past, present and future, there was one important issue that did not receive enough attention. I refer to the different approaches taken by the majority of Catholic moral theologians and of the hierarchical magisterium of the church. James Keenan in his acclaimed history of Catholic moral theology in

the 20th century describes the methodology of Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* as neo-manualist. Keenan goes on to say, "Few moral theologians found the encyclical a hospitable acceptance of their work during the 25 years since *Humanae Vitae*." Enda McDonagh has titled his latest book *Theology in Winter Light*.

This is not only a theoretical issue; it has practical ramifications since it deals with such concrete issues as contraception, sterilization, divorce, homosexuality, abortion in its legal and moral aspects, and especially the role of women in the church. Even Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* recognized the problem and called it "a genuine crisis." But we in this meeting have not really addressed this crisis.

We cannot put our heads in the sand. The present problems of priests' pedophilia and its cover-up by bishops have made many recognize the need for change in our church. The reality is that many people have left the church not because of disagreements with basic areas of faith and Catholic eucharistic celebration, but often because of the issues mentioned above, as well as the pedophilia crisis. Our church today is in serious trouble, but I have to admit in light of the earlier emphasis on social location I am speaking primarily from the perspective of the church in Europe and in North America. But still, the problem today in these churches is great and has to be recognized and addressed. This problem is especially acute for women in our church.

Bishop Kevin Dowling [of Rustenburg, South Africa] has recently candidly addressed the authoritarianism and overcentralization in the church today. Antonio Autiero [of the University of Münster, Germany], our host in Trent, has recognized the great number of Catholics leaving the church today because of its moral teachings. "One cannot deny that there is a movement away from the church, quite explicitly or sometimes even simply pragmatically, precisely on account of the church's insistence on moral themes public or private, marked by normative solutions that make little sense to the critical consciousness of contemporary men and women."

The Pew Research Center in the United States concluded a few years ago that one out of three people who were raised in the Catholic church in the United States are no longer Catholic today. The second largest "religious denomination" in the United States today consists of fallen-away Catholics. One out of 10 people in the United States is such a fallen-away Catholic.

Catholic parents and grandparents are well aware of this reality. Let me add here a personal note. A few weeks ago I was on vacation for a week with friends -- a wife and husband, their four children, and eight grandchildren along with other friends. The grandparents are in their 70s and the adult children are around 40. Only one of the four adult children was married in the Catholic church, but today two of them and their spouses are staunch members of the Episcopal church. I assure you that relativism and secularism played no role in their decisions.

Our love for the church and our role as Catholic moral theologians call for all of us to address these issues no matter what our positions are. We who are advocates for change must recognize our own limited social location and the need to listen to all others. An honest, open dialogue is required on the part of everyone in the church based on a mutual love for the church, a respect for all those engaging in the discussion, and a recognition of the essential roles in the church of the Holy Spirit, the hierarchical magisterium, theologians, and the *sensus fidelium*. We are all called to put flesh and blood on the ancient axiom, "*In necessariis, unitas; in dubiis, libertas; in omnibus, caritas.*" (In necessary matters, unity; in doubtful matters, freedom; in all things, charity.)

NCR coverage of the meeting of moral theologians in Trent.

- [The changing face\(s\) of moral theology](#) [3], by Fr. James Keenan
- [Trent launches world revolution in theology](#) [1], by John L. Allen Jr.
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