

A RESPONSE (II) TO J. BRYAN HEHIR

I stand somewhat in awe at the way Bryan Hehir has been able to summarize and analyse the developments in the social teaching and practice of the Church around the world and locally since Vatican II. Although I am not a social ethicist, his portrayal of what has gone on and his implicit apology for it ring precisely true. I respond to his address, then, from the perspective of theology and ask what the implications of his argument are for theologians in North America. And my thesis would be that, if Hehir's analysis is correct, then the American bishops' activism opens up a method by which a North American theology might be developed in the future.

The major premise from which I would argue would be Hehir's own, namely, that in Vatican II's teachings in the documents on the Church in modern world and on religious freedom a major shift occurred. The sheer perspective of viewing the Church in relation to the world and human society transformed the very context in which other issues were understood, so that they appeared in an entirely new light. As a result the social ministry of the Church came to be seen "as no longer at the margin of the Church's life" but at the center, "*of the Church's nature*"; *the Church's social ministry was moved "from the periphery to the core of the Church's life and work."*

A further result of that shift, I think, has been a closer binding together of the Church's traditional social teaching and strictly religious premises and theological understanding. It is true that the standard argument of the Church's recent social teaching moves from a basis of faith to the fundamental datum of the transcendent dignity of the human person and through it, almost as through the narrow passage of an hour glass, out into the social arena which is the context of the existence of the human person. This is illustrated not only in *Gaudium et spes* but also in the second draft of the bishops pastoral on the economy, and in the recent "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. And insofar as these documents are also aimed at an audience beyond the Church, the social teaching can be appreciated by people who share the conviction in the value of the person. But insofar as the Christian is concerned, behind the straight line of that objective argument, what is really coming to bear is a whole theological vision of human existence given us by faith through revelation in Jesus which is itself the ground of the dignity of the human person and of the Church. It is also true that much of the Church's social teaching is "human wisdom" that draws from empirical data and social sciences so that its conclusions involve prudential decisions. Hehir points to the various levels of "authority" at which the teachings unfold. But the standpoint is religious and that implies a whole theological world view. My premise, then, is that the shift that occurred with Vatican

II relative to the social ministry of the Church implies a shift in theological vision as well, one in which social teaching and theological conception are brought into a much more intrinsic interconnection.

This premise seems to be confirmed by developments in the Latin American Church. Hehir describes how the principle of Vatican II regarding the essential social function of the Church combined with the principle of inculturation so that the center not only recognized the need but also urged local churches to interpret centrist or universal teaching at the periphery in the light of social analysis of the local situation. He also averts to the fact that currently the social ministry of the Latin American Church is backed up by a developed liberation theology and further pastoral strategies. But these were not really in place at the Bishops Conference at Medellin in 1968. Rather this theology developed from Vatican II through the Latin American bishops' commitment to the poor in their situation of systemic injustice. One way to understand the dynamics of the development of liberation theology is to see it as a slow, deliberate, corporate and cumulative unpacking of the theological vision that is implied in the Church's response to such a situation. In short, the social teaching and public ministry of the local church bends back upon and illumines the very religious motivation that impelled it. Thus one finds here an example of praxis generating theory.

A conclusion for theology that may be drawn from Hehir's analysis is that a way to begin to formulate a peculiarly North American theology might be to systematically ask what theological implications underlie the social teaching and activism of the leadership of the Church. I am impressed by Hehir's perception of the center-periphery tension in the development of the whole Church since Vatican II. Something of universal import is occurring in the whole Church, even though it has different and distinctive local manifestations. And Hehir is obviously correct in saying that the North American Church has not developed a theology as noteworthy as that of the South, even though there are several distinctive movements in our midst. But as Hehir again points out, the finely argued bishops' pastorals on war and peace and on the economy incorporate a nuanced understanding of the North American cultural situation and represent an inculturated teaching on the social relevance of the Christian message in our context. One way of constructing a local theology, then, would be to allow the social commitment of our Church, its content and its style, to call into question our standard theological views of not only the Church but also of all other theological doctrines. What are the implications of our Church's social critique and commitment for our theological understanding of anthropology, the dynamics of faith and revelation, how Jesus reveals God, the nature and will of God, the direction of human empowerment by the Spirit, the function of sacraments, the purpose of ministry, the meaning of spirituality?

Finally, there is a need for this. Hehir alluded to the fact that one of the major criticisms of the pastorals concerns the competency of religious leaders to engage public policy issues and the danger that their authority in matters of personal morality might be undermined. This is rejected by the bishops on the firm grounds of Vatican II that calls this split between personal religious faith and issues of social life one of the foremost errors of this age. But it is safe to say that this criticism and error is not found simply among people outside the Church. It reflects as well

the position of many in the Church, including clergy, religious and those being trained for ministry. Negatively, therefore, if a theological mediation of the world view of faith that underlies the bishops teaching is not forthcoming, they may become isolated from many of their own people. But positively, such a theological mediation would help the leadership of the Church to communicate through preaching and catechesis a theological vision that would support the bishops teaching with a living spirituality.

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