

## **Appendix A**

### **REPORT OF THE INTERSOCIETAL COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND ECCLESIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The Committee, constituted in fall 1986 by the executive boards of The Catholic Biblical Association, The Catholic Theological Society of America, and The College Theology Society, and made up of two members of each society, met twice during 1986-87 to fulfill their general mandate—to provide services regarding issues of academic freedom and ecclesial responsibility. The Committee decided that it could best fulfill its mandate given the constraints of time by providing a statement of the main issues for the use of the executive committees.

The Committee is convinced that many members of the three Catholic scholarly societies are disheartened about restrictions imposed on some of their colleagues and about the general failure of the church to understand the pastoral task of theologians in the church. Scholars' low morale is causing alienation from the church and abandonment of research and publication in controversial areas. The Committee does not wish to assign blame but points out the serious problem posed to the church by mistrust of its scholars and disregard of their scholarly expertise.

A first step in enabling Catholic scholars to contribute to the church is to clarify what is meant by theologians' ecclesial responsibility and by academic freedom.

The ecclesial responsibility of theologians includes fidelity both to the tradition of the church and to the growth of that tradition as life-giving knowledge in the Christian community. Theologians and scholars have a responsibility to ensure that the central concerns of the tradition always remain clear, and to avoid unduly extending or narrowing it. Moreover, they are to keep the tradition in dialogue with the experience of the Christian people. Theologians' ecclesial responsibilities extend to care for their students, who will be the teachers and religious educators of the future community of faith.

In this pastoral understanding of ecclesial responsibility, freedom of research and publication is essential. It is necessary for the dual pastoral task of listening to the people of God and listening to the tradition. Theologians and scholars must see their freedom as pastoral, as a necessary condition for their contributing to the life of the church.

Related to the pastoral understanding of freedom to do research and publication, and to educate theologians and religious educators, is the modern concept of academic freedom. The history of North American higher education illustrates how necessary academic freedom is for the healthy functioning of colleges and uni-

versities and for the healthy development of the discipline of theology. Where academic freedom does not flourish controversial areas are not explored and good minds seek other channels of expression. Political pressures begin to determine what is useful to know. Controversial areas of theology, such as sexuality and ministry, suffer neglect. Theology students are not prepared to cope with the cultural situation. The community is left without credible Christian wisdom.

The freedom proper to the theologian in the church is safeguarded by reverencing the respective roles of the bishop and the theologian. Failure to define and respect the specific roles and responsibilities of bishop and theologian in the church leads to attributing undue authority to one at the expense of the other. Defining their roles requires more discussion than the Committee was able to provide in its limited time span. Two important factors obscuring their respective roles can nonetheless be pointed out.

One major cause of role confusion is the dramatic increase in papal and Vatican documents in recent years. The teaching office of the papacy expanded in the mid-nineteenth century in response to European revolutionary movements but recent years have seen a veritable flood of official documentation. Not only articulations of basic church teaching but also its detailed interpretation is routinely provided by episcopal conferences and especially by Vatican congregations. The task of interpreting and exploring basic teaching, the traditional task of theologians, has to a large extent been taken over by church officials. Theologians' discussion of episcopal or Vatican documents is often after their publication; their almost inevitable qualifications and disagreements about details cast theologians as dissenting or disloyal. Theologians feel frustrated in their traditional pastoral task and pushed to the margins of church life.

Another cause of confusion over bishop's and theologians' roles is the way in which the media (now unfortunately the source of many Catholics' understanding of their church), habitually confuses the two roles and actually encourages conflict. A common media stereotype of the Roman Catholic Church is that of an organization in which liberals and conservatives struggle for power: the bishops, supporting Roman orthodoxy, battle liberal theologians and activists of various causes. Newspapers ask theologians to comment on Vatican statements virtually on the day of their publication and headline their critical comments. The resultant conflict makes excellent copy but creates the impression that the theologians are leaders of a minority, dissident party.

Clarifying the proper teaching roles of theologians and bishops and calling theologians to their traditional pastoral task is of crucial importance today. The dialogue between bishops and theologians conducted by the Committee on Doctrine of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops is an excellent beginning. The Committee is encouraged by the establishment of the Commission of Bishops and Scholars made up of bishops and representatives of Catholic scholarly societies. Also to be commended is the statement on Doctrinal Responsibilities (Procedures for Promoting Cooperation and Resolving Disputes between Bishops and Theologians) produced by the Joint Committee of the Canon Law Society of America and the Catholic Theological Society of America. Worthy of note, too, is the statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the Association of Theo-

logical Schools (an organization to which nearly all Roman Catholic seminaries belong). The aim of the dialogues and statements is not simply to assure theologians of protection but, much more importantly, to invite them to take on their historical pastoral role in the church.

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