

TOPIC: ETHICAL DECISION MAKING AND MORALITY

To begin...

Women speak
to the Bishops'

In the Catholic Church we do not have a well-exercised theology of dissent. Simply challenge to authority is seen as disloyal. This was not always so: In the Old Testament Job called God to account and refused to be silenced. Job taught us that it is for each person to negotiate the terms of submission to a higher authority and that when confronted with injustice, questioning is more righteous than accepting.

In the Letter of St Paul to the Galatians we read that when Paul learned that Peter was not acting in a manner consistent with what he believed and taught, Paul confronted Peter- Gal 2:11-13.

Second Vatican Council spoke on moral decision making:

‘Deep within their conscience human beings discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves but which they must obey. Their dignity lies in observing this law, and by it they will be judged. Conscience is their most secret core, and their sanctuary. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths. Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other people in the search for truth and for the right solutions to so many moral problems which arise both in the lives of individuals and from social relationships.’ (Gaudium et Spes. n.16)

**From the readings above what do you think is meant by the term ‘loyal dissent’?
What are some recent issues over which it has arisen with Church teaching?**

Many of the traditional Church teaching concerning women were a source of much alienation. A submission from a woman from Sydney stated:

Recent Vatican pronouncements on contraception, abortion, ordination are seen to be unnecessarily harsh in tone... There are other major concerns though in moral theology, especially with regard to sexuality. The Church’s teachings with regard to women have increasingly come under attack as being out of touch with women’s experiences. (p. 95)

The finding of the research from the written submissions public hearings and targeted groups indicated that the question of the ordination of women has not been resolved in that it had not been received by the faithful of the church as an expression of Church belief (See *sensus fidelium*). The finding is also supported by the Church Life Survey concerning respondents’ acceptance of this Church’s teaching. Only 42% of the Church attenders accepted it with no difficulty. p384 (See the Lesson on Method of Research and Findings of the Report for a profile of this group)

How the teaching of the Church is received by its members.

In recent times there has developed, within the institutional church, a strong legalistic understanding of what is called the Church's Magisterium (teaching office). This juridical understanding means that such teaching 'demands assent'. This idea had its origins at the Council of Trent in the 16th century but has now become central within the official church. This is not an understanding of the role of teaching office that existed in the church in earlier times.

However this understanding of the role of the Magisterium leads to a danger – that demanding unquestioning assent can promote a permanent 'moral immaturity'. It is the lowest level in Kohlberg's theory of moral development. This type of behaviour is something that is expected of very young children, that is, looking to authority figures to tell them what is right and wrong. The dominant understanding is to the avoidance of punishment and deference to power. (Camille Paul – Australian moral theologian)

Vatican II tells us that when we are making a moral decision we have to consider our total situation: physical, mental, economic. (Gaudium et Spes n. 50) There is need to consider our family situation, our community, our own prayerful reflection and the teaching of the church on that particular issue. We then come to an informed judgement of conscience which we are bound to follow.

Vatican II defines what is meant by 'sensus fidelium'



'When it is at its best religion offers more than a list of answers designed to resolve the unanswerable; it tenders a way to deal with questions that plague our lives and puzzle our hearts.' (Joan Chittister: In Search of Belief, 1999)

How does Joan Chittister's definition of religion compare with the description of the Magisterium (teaching office) described by Camille Paul opposite?

'Our love for an institution is in proportion to our desire to reform it.' John Stuart Mill.
Discuss this in relation to the term 'loyal dissent'.

(Graham English's Cartoon)