

Comment

After Curran

This publication is by no means always first into the fray. Admittedly, it was not until 25 July that Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote a letter to Professor Charles Curran, America's best-known Catholic moral theologian, dismissing him from his post at the Catholic University of America because his published views on divorce, birth control, masturbation, abortion, premarital sex, gay sex and euthenasia did not entirely correspond with what Rome had said on these matters. But the Vatican first wrote to Dr Curran about his views as long ago as 1979, and in the United States 'the Curran case' has been the subject of hot controversy for a long time. More than the career and standing of one man has been at stake; Curran is one of the leaders of the moderate liberals in the American Catholic Church. During all these years, however, we, on this journal, did not think the case called for any special comment from us.

What the Vatican is saying now, though, very directly touches us all. For it has rejected Curran's plea that a professional theologian should be able to legitimately dissent from 'non-infallible' teaching on matters 'far removed from the core of faith'. Curran's many sympathizers see Ratzinger's reply as an attack on the whole theological enterprise, as an attempt to reduce all theology to catechetics—a 'dangerous movement of reaction', to quote *The Tablet*. And extra support for that conclusion comes from reports that the Vatican is thinking of getting the superiors of religious orders which publish theological journals to force those journals all to toe the Roman line.

Even so, we do not feel that much is to be gained merely by voicing our indignation, seeing how much indignation has already been voiced. It would be more useful to remind people that the Curran case started as a conflict about sexual ethics. It is an important conflict because, as far as the Church is concerned, *in practice* is there anything more important than how we are to behave sexually? The shadow of the nuclear holocaust, the advancing of social justice, the conquering of human greed, inter-faith dialogue, even promotion of the fundamental truths of the Faith—in day-to-day Church life are any of these as important, in the eyes of the men of the Vatican and of the mass of ordinary Catholics, as is the fight over what is orthodoxy in the area of sexual ethics? Curran would not have had the rough treatment he has had if he had been writing controversially about anything else. To quote another moral theologian: 'I have important work to do and I am not going to let it be

destroyed by saying how my views on sex may depart from the official teaching; on questions of sexual ethics I prefer to keep silent.' Thousands of other priests who in all other ways are men of high integrity would say exactly the same.

The sheer oddness of this state of affairs has been joked about often enough, but jokes alone do not get us anywhere. And while it is easy enough to explain why so many Catholics—not just those in the Vatican—are so obsessed with the question 'How should we behave sexually?', none of our explanations tell us how to get out of the mess we are all in. We can, in fact, fairly confidently believe that both Cardinal Ratzinger and Dr Curran are at one about what really matters. In other words, that they are equally anxious to preserve the dignity of the human person and to promote 'continence', using that word in its Augustinian sense of single-minded devotion to God. But when these two try to say what these admirable aims mean in daily life the cultural divisions that divide them are so deep that there is clearly no chance of them ever speaking as with one voice. Even the most basic terms—marriage, sex—mean something subtly different to the two men. And the cultural differences that condition the way Christians make sense of their sexuality are more likely to grow than to disappear. But is this going to be the disaster for the Catholic Church that it looks like being?

The basic criticism of the Church's stance on sex made by the young writer of the *Response* published in this issue—a response to what Timothy Radcliffe had to say about sex in the July/August number—is not that the Church thinks sex is bad, but, on the contrary, that the Church expects much too much of sex. Talking about what he had written, he said he believed 'the Church gives an importance to sex that many young people do not think it has'. Both Cardinal Ratzinger and Dr Curran belong to a generation overshadowed by Freud; whether 'liberal' or 'conservative', its members have no doubts about the central place of sex in our lives. Now, maybe, another voice is being heard—not that these young people intend to be celibates, but they distrust much of the pseudo-mysticism that in this century has surrounded sex, in senior Church circles as well as in communes of the sixties. They close their ears to the earnest debates of their parents and grandparents about sex not because they have no morals but because they will not take for granted some of the things so many of the middle-aged take for granted about sex—above all, that it is necessarily *the* experience in life, the climax of intimacy, the measure of all self-giving.

Is there a remote chance that they will free the Church from the shackles of its interminable debates about sex? Let us hope so, for the Church cannot afford many repetitions of the Curran case.

J.O.M.