

Book Review -- Catholic priest-theologian looks at how he became loyal dissenter

By Wayne A. Holst, Catholic News Service (CA), December 29, 2006

"This book will try to explain how the church and moral theology have changed in the past 50 years and how I matured from an uncritical, dutiful, pre-Vatican II Catholic into a loyal dissenter who remains a committed Catholic."

So begins *Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian*, the autobiography of Father Charles E. Curran, whom some consider one of American Catholicism's most influential moral theologians even though he was barred by the Vatican from teaching as a Catholic theologian nearly 20 years ago because of his dissent from church teaching on sexual ethics and other issues.

Because of his notoriety and his considerable media savvy, some commentators have written him off as an angry rebel or an arrogant intellectual. "But I am neither of these," he writes, dispassionately, halfway through the book. Father Curran considers himself "a progressively moderate Catholic theologian" who is hopeful yet realistic about how things eventually will turn out.

The book is not a superficial read. Mirroring the candid opinion of friends, the author states: "I might not have the most scintillating writing style but I was always crystal clear."

"Teaching moments" infuse his writing. Ever the pedagogue, and even after lost battles with church authorities, the author carefully assesses the situation in order to interpret constructive learning opportunities from what happened.

Father Curran honors the office of the bishop of Rome. "I respect and love Pope Benedict XVI as he tries to carry out his most difficult office. Like all Catholics, I pray daily for the wisdom he needs." And, despite major differences, Father Curran affirms a common calling to the priesthood – and to the Catholic Church, despite what he considers its many flaws.

Still, he insists that "while conscious of my own shortcomings, I will continue to offer what I believe are constructive criticisms for the good of the pilgrim church."

His complex positions attract widespread support and strong condemnation. Father Curran presents his memoirs honestly and thoughtfully, with intellectual precision. The book is not a page-turner but is, nonetheless, dramatically intriguing and written with passion.

Broadly speaking, *Loyal Dissent* is a substantive overview of the triumph and tragedy that is American Catholicism during the past 50 years. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the author, his credentials for addressing this major topic are impeccable.

Father Curran tells of his Catholic upbringing in Rochester, N.Y., his priestly formation in the United States, and his graduate studies in Rome. His doctorate, completed during an era much different from our own, demonstrated that he had still not learned to speak in his own voice.

His years as a professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington were exciting but deeply disconcerting for the increasingly popular teacher. His style blended the pastoral and the academic as he addressed the moral concerns of his students and the church's moral theology.

He felt that many of the existing procedures at Catholic University were outdated, even dishonest, in comparison with general American academic standards. Most importantly, he was determined to stop what he considered the lack of academic freedom at the university.

Father Curran fought for the right to challenge noninfallible church teachings in Catholic educational institutions, but his initiatives were countered by academic and hierarchical opponents. Increasingly, he writes, his enemies were determined to take him down and make an example of him.

"I was the perfect target ... a public figure ... a lightning rod," he says.

No one wins these battles. It is both bracing and lamentable to read of how things played out. Ultimately, his lawsuit charging unlawful dismissal by Catholic University ended in failure. And the Vatican said his dissenting positions made Father Curran "not suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic theology."

Several years of painful struggle ensued but he landed on his feet as a professor of Catholic moral theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Since then he has continued to lecture extensively from this Protestant podium and is heard frequently in the media. In some respects, Father Curran feels he is more influential today than ever -- even within Catholicism. "By silencing me," he says, "I have been given many opportunities to speak."

He was neither defrocked nor excommunicated. He remains a Catholic priest and an active member of a local Catholic community (though pastorally he prefers teaching to presiding at the Eucharist).

Father Curran is sanguine about his contribution to the good of the church. "My story," he maintains, "is only a small part of a much larger one."

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Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian, by Charles E. Curran. Georgetown University Press. (Washington, 2006). 297 pp., \$26.95.