

Tough Love

“Loyal Dissent - Memoirs of a Catholic Theologian”

Charles E. Curran

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Charles Curran was once the best-known Catholic priest in the United States. His headline-grabbing dismissal from the Catholic University of America (CUA) in 1986 after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) found him unfit to teach Catholic theology made him virtually a household name. Curran’s firing was the climax to a protracted series of struggles with university and church authorities reaching back to his days as a seminary instructor.

The events of those years have been told before, most notably in Curran’s own *Faithful Dissent* and in Kenneth Briggs’s *Holy Siege: The Year That Shook Catholic America*. In the introduction to *Loyal Dissent*, Curran explains that his friends had long been urging him to write his memoirs. Curran freely admits that he is “not the most scintillating of writers,” and this admission is amply supported by the evidence of his prose. Yet his story is compelling enough to be retold without much flourish, and it is only toward the end of the book—where he veers into an excursus on the development of theology in the last half-century—that he may lose the reader’s attention.

Curran was born in 1934 to a middle-class Catholic family in Rochester, New York. He attended minor seminary, where he graduated as valedictorian. After two years at St. Bernard’s major seminary, he showed such academic promise that his bishop sent him to the Gregorian University in Rome for further study. After his ordination in 1958, Curran remained in Rome to pursue a doctorate in moral theology. During his time there, he encountered the renowned moral theologians Bernard Häring and Joseph Fuchs, who were trying to move their field beyond its traditional focus on the sacrament of penance, and into the broader context of the whole of Christian life.

In 1961, Curran returned to Rochester to teach at St. Bernard’s, where he remained throughout most of Vatican II. By 1965, his writings and talks on sexual ethics—particularly contraception—had begun attracting attention. In response to complaints about Curran’s positions, his bishop decided to remove him from the St. Bernard’s faculty. He was allowed to take a teaching position at CUA in Washington, D.C., but continued to be dogged by controversy. His increasingly public disagreements with church teaching distressed university officials and, in 1966, the Board of Trustees voted not to renew Curran’s contract, but a well-organized faculty and student protest eventually led to his reinstatement.

It’s reasonable to wonder whether Curran’s victory at CUA emboldened him to take the stand for which he is most remembered. In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae vitae*, reaffirming the church’s teaching against artificial contraception. Curran and several of his CUA colleagues responded with a statement signed by eighty-seven theologians (the number eventually grew to six hundred) opposing the encyclical—an unprecedented action that made international news. The Board of Trustees again tried taking action against Curran, but a faculty Board of Inquiry decided in his favor.

Curran continued to teach at CUA throughout the 1970s. His disagreements with church teaching expanded beyond contraception to include homosexuality, divorce, and assisted reproduction. Not surprisingly, he also defended the right of Catholics to dissent from noninfallible teachings. But Curran’s interests were also expanding beyond the moral problems of individuals to the realm of social ethics, and he developed an approach to moral theology that would join individual and social ethics.

In 1979, the CDF informed Curran that he was under investigation. What followed was a series of increasingly pointed communications between Curran and the CDF that went on for several years. Attempts to reach a compromise—including a personal meeting between Curran and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the CDF—ultimately proved fruitless. On July 26, 1986, Ratzinger sent a letter to Curran that declared him “not suitable or eligible to teach Catholic theology.”

In the wake of this letter, Cardinal James Hickey, the chancellor of CUA, tried to remove Curran from his teaching position. Curran fought the decision, but ultimately lost a three-year legal battle. Two years after his departure from CUA, Curran became the Elizabeth Scurlock Professor in Human Values at Southern Methodist University, where he has taught happily ever since.

Two decades later, Curran’s theological positions and his manner of expressing them are still debated. His “relational-responsibility” model of the moral life, which situates the person in the context of his multiple relationships (with God, world, self), has occasionally been criticized for excessive subjectivity, although his criticisms of traditional Catholic approaches to sexual ethics are widely shared by moral theologians today. Even many of Curran’s defenders have questions about his embrace of the term “dissent” to describe a situation in which a theologian’s views stand in tension with those of the magisterium. Fellow ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill, for example, has suggested that a better way to think about this tension is to understand it as an aspect of the development of doctrine.

But a memoir demands an assessment of the man, not merely his ideas. For all his outspokenness, the Curran that emerges from these pages is still something of an enigma. Many shared Curran’s views, but few were as willing to bear the cost of repeated public confrontations with church authorities. Time and again we see Curran rejecting the advice of friends and colleagues to pursue a less confrontational path. Clearly, he believed that he could not, in good conscience, do otherwise. But his sparse description of his formative years provides few clues to the source of his indefatigable will.

Whatever the source of Curran's courage, there is no doubt that his time in Rome was crucial to his intellectual conversion. He studied at a time when Catholic theology was emerging from the defensive crouch it had assumed in the wake of the modernist crisis of the early twentieth century. The neoscholastic theology Curran had imbibed as a seminarian had become an "exhausted project," having lost whatever power it once had to make the truths of the faith intellectually compelling. Curran and others like him were struggling to pick up the pieces of a shattered system, and ideas forged in such a crucible are not easily relinquished, even if the cost of holding on to them is great. For an intellectually gifted young man like Curran, there could be no going back to a time when theologians simply submitted to ecclesiastical censorship. Whether one ultimately agrees with Curran or not, his story is a reminder that when ideas lose their intrinsic power to command assent, authority can only do so much.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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