

## Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church

**W**hat can loyal Catholics do when they see their church failing to live up to its own ideals? Whenever Vatican II's vision of a just, collegial exercise of church authority is violated, what recourse is there for a layperson, a sister, a priest, a theologian or, for that matter, an archbishop? Far too often we see our beloved church preaching a gospel message of justice, equality, human rights and freedom of conscience, while at the same time equality, conscientious dissent and due process are being denied its own members. This double standard produces a serious problem of credibility.

Could a non-Christian, for instance, be able to understand anything about Christianity by watching the way the Vatican has treated theologians such as Boff, Kung, Schillebeeckx and now, closer to home, our prototypical American theologian, Charles Curran (fast becoming the Dreyfus case of American Catholicism)? Worse still, the treatment of some American nuns, both the sisters who signed The New York Times ad and their elected officials, has been lacking in elementary decency and respect. At least Rome will actually "talk" to troublesome males. An outside observer might deduce from this papacy that the church is again adopting a policy of governance suitable for a Renaissance principedom, a throwback to the old order of the divine right of rulers. People living in free societies can hardly be edified. What happened to the church's teaching on basic human rights, so ably proclaimed by recent popes in magnificent encyclicals? The discrepancy between our preaching abroad and our practice at home is painful and demoralizing.

What do you do when you judge your own leaders to be failing in their exercise of collegial Christian authority, but they, naturally, insist that you have no right to question their unilateral definitions and practices? The message that comes over the water from the Vatican is clear and familiar: "Yours not to reason why, yours but to do and die" and "reconsider and retract." Clearly, the deep

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«Sidney Callahan is an author, professor of psychology and a board member of the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church. If you wish more information about A.R.C.C., write to it at: P.O. Box 912, Delran, N.J. 08075.»

and basic dispute going on in the church today involves the interpretations of Vatican II as well as the Catholic tradition regarding the limits of legitimate dissent and the exercise of authority.

Certainly, no loyal Catholic questions the need for church authority. Authority is necessary to teach Christian doctrine with enough backbone, bite and boundary-setting to maintain tradition and identity. Of course, we cannot be mushy and woolly-headed, believing anything and everything all at the same time in some contradictory and chaotic state of anarchy. Rather, today's intrachurch disputes turn on theological differences over central questions: 1) Where and with whom does church authority reside? and 2) How should Christian authority be exercised when confronting informed conscientious dissent within a loyal community of believers?

**T**his ever-growing crisis over freedom of conscience and the just exercise of church authority has moved a group of American Catholics to form the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church (A.R.C.C.). A.R.C.C. was founded in 1980 to implement the ideals of Vatican II by bringing about substantive structural change in the Catholic church. Following Pope Paul VI, A.R.C.C. believes that "justice is love's minimum." In pursuit of Christian justice, the church needs shared decision-making, fair due-process procedures, equality of persons and accountability. After all, the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the font of Western civilization's historical evolution toward respect for persons and the inviolability of individual conscience in a just community of equals.

A.R.C.C. provides a forum for discussion, raises Catholic consciousness on the need for justice *within* the church through research, education and advocacy work. Another new effort aims at the actual observance of diocesan due-process procedures, already drawn up and approved by the Canon Law Society and the bishops, but hardly implemented in practice. After five years, perhaps the most significant achievement of A.R.C.C. has been the creation and publication of a charter of the rights of Catholics in the church, which already has been translated into French, Spanish, German, Dutch and Polish.

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