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Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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Ethical Issues and Ecumenism

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

*Finding
a path
through
the
mine
fields
ahead.*

THE ALMOST 25 YEARS since the end of the Second Vatican Council have seen an incredible proliferation of ecumenical dialogues and agreed statements. The vast majority of them have focused on the ecclesiological issues that have divided the churches since the 16th century: the nature of the Eucharist, the theology and structure of the ministry, the exercise of authority, episcopacy, even the question of papal primacy.

Occasionally the ecumenical dialogue has turned to other disputed questions beyond the area of ecclesiology. Lutherans and Roman Catholics as well as Lutherans and Anglicans have concluded dialogues on the doctrine of justification by faith. Though different emphases and approaches have emerged and been recognized, rooted in different theological perspectives and structures of thought, a surprising level of agreement has been reached through the dialogues.

But there remains one area in which little dialogue has taken place and which could constitute a major obstacle, a virtual mine field on the road to Christian unity. It is the area of ethics. The fact that the churches generally have not explored their differences on ethical questions may indicate that they are at least implicitly aware of the vast differences between them in this area. The recent decision of the General Council of the United Church of Canada to accept practicing homosexuals into the ordained ministry and the election of Barbara Harris, who takes essentially the same position, as a bishop in the U.S. Episcopal Church, are indications that these divisive issues will increasingly confront the churches involved in the ecumenical movement.

In March 1986, the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, mandated to protect the growing sense of fellowship among the

THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J., is professor of theology and rector of the Jesuit Community at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, Calif.

churches, initiated a process of gathering information on those ethical and moral issues that might be the occasion for new divisions between them in the future. It requested that a number of groups in North America enter into dialogue on local levels to identify some of these issues and to attempt to find ways of dealing with them.

In Los Angeles, Msgr. Royal M. Vadakin, director of the Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, assembled an ecumenical task force known as the Ad Hoc Ethics Committee. The committee, made up of resource people from the archdiocese as well as representatives from the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Methodist churches along with the president of the Ecumenical Council of Southern California, met for the first time on Sept. 10, 1986. Over the next year the committee met bimonthly. Its members presented papers from their own perspectives or that of their respective traditions; they discussed their differences openly and with considerable candor.

Identifying the Issues. From the beginning, a number of things became clear to the members of the committee. First of all, there was general agreement that the whole area of ethical/moral questions constituted the Achilles' heel of the ecumenical movement. Among the various churches there were considerable differences, both in regard to what the crucial ethical issues were as well as to how specific issues should be approached.

Second, there was considerable disagreement regarding how a particular question should be identified. For example, was abortion to be considered a human life issue or a woman's rights issue?

Third, it became increasingly evident that it is sometimes impossible to separate the ways in which particular ethical or moral issues are formulated from the way in which authority in a particular church is structured and exercised. This is particularly true regarding women's issues and also sexuality in general, which emerged as a

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principal problem. A number of times the point was made that men and women often have different approaches to certain questions, and therefore a teaching authority exercised exclusively by men may be perceived by some as excluding other points of view that deserve to be heard. Some argue that the unique experience of women has been ignored; it should be taken into account. For these reasons, some believe that it is impossible to sepa-

rate questions of sexual ethics from the question of women in ministry and the ordination of women.

Because of the diversity of viewpoints and approaches represented among the members of the committee, it was decided to divide a list of controversial or critical questions into three categories: 1) issues on which the churches were in substantial agreement; 2) issues of potential conflict, and 3) issues of actual conflict.

The members of the committee found that they were in substantial agreement on issues ranging from health-care delivery; care for the dying; organ transplants; justice, peace and human rights issues; opposition to substance abuse; support for ecological concerns, and conscientious objection to military conscription. They recognized the possibility of conflict on questions such as the unacceptability of sex outside of marriage, women's issues, disarmament, civil disobedience, genetic engineering and screening, and a number of church/state issues. They were in actual conflict over questions of divorce and remarriage, abortion, birth control, new reproductive technologies, surrogate parenthood, sterilization, the ordination of women, human sexuality, authority—both ecclesiastical and political—and family concerns.

Identifying and classifying the issues was a helpful first step for the committee. From the initial discussions it became clear that there were considerable differences, not only among the various traditions but often within a particular community as well.

Finding Common Ground. The second stage of the process involved an in-depth analysis of the concerns that had surfaced along with the various issues. In the months that followed, these concerns were investigated by means of papers presented by different members of the committee. The discussion focused on four areas: first, ecumenical issues in sexual ethics; second, how moral learning takes place in Protestant and Catholic communities, both for individuals and for their respective churches; third, the concerns of women as an ecumenical challenge; and finally, what the members of the committee themselves had learned from the process.

1. The discussion on sexual ethics, based on a paper by two committee members, Fran Burnford and Jeremiah McCarthy, took place within an ecumenical framework provided by James Gustafson's book, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (1978). According to Gustafson, the Protestant tradition is characterized by its concern for biblical categories, its affirmation of historical experience and its adherence to the Word of God as a guiding moral norm in concrete decision making. The Catholic tradition is known for its reliance on human reasoning, its careful analysis of concrete cases (casuistry) and its emphasis on tradition and moral authority in the formation of conscience. Each tradition can serve as a complement to the other.

While there is considerable agreement about the sources that should inform moral decision making, there

is considerably less agreement about what should serve as the central paradigm for moral discourse. For example, some would argue for a natural law methodology; others would place more emphasis on concrete human experience. The members of the committee suggested that recognizing a complementarity of perspectives might be more helpful than any attempt to decide the larger methodological issues. They urged an emphasis on the skills necessary for Christian living—for example, chastity—and on the Christian tradition of the virtues. From the tradition they sought to retrieve the notions of the “discernment of spirits,” and the “common good” as its focus, and they suggested developing teaching documents to aid in the formation of conscience.

2. A paper by committee member Frank Colborn on the subject of how moral learning takes place paralleled the process for individuals and their churches. Moral learning takes place within the community into which one is born. Values are communicated through stories and customs that are used to socialize the new member. But as a person grows in age and experience, his or her community expands, exposing the person to new stories and different points of view. The result can be a deeper appreciation of the tradition, but it can also lead to a critical questioning of the tradition and even to a disengagement from it. The morally mature person will make a commitment, one way or the other, on the basis of an inner experience of growth, a deeper sense of community and the satisfaction gained from an involvement in what contributes to a better world.

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Churches learn moral truth through an analogous process and must also at times rethink their moral teachings, with the help of their saints and prophets and at the risk of schism and loss. But in both cases, the criteria for discerning the right and the true are the same: the recognition of what leads to greater peace, joy, love and the other fruits of the Spirit, the experience of growth toward better and deeper relationships, and the praxis of justice and the reflection praxis demands.

The most difficult problem is posed by the modern culture in which the churches live. For Catholics in particular, there is a strong emphasis on the church's institutional

authority and its tradition, and a tendency to be cautious about the pragmatic approach so valued by the culture. Many (but not all) Protestant churches, for both historical and theological reasons, tend to be more willing to embrace modern approaches to morality. This contributes to a growing divergence between the two traditions on a variety of issues.

3. Marie Anne Mayeski and Fran Burnford, two of the women on the committee, presented papers on the concerns of women from an ecumenical perspective. First, they reviewed the history of the Christian tradition. The early missionary period reveals an initial openness on the part of Christian communities to public ecclesial roles for women. Later such roles were closed to them. Subsequent generations used the patristic teaching on the natural inferiority of women and their vulnerability to sin, particular sexual sins, to justify the subordination of women to men. In recent times theological developments and a concern for justice have led a number of Protestant churches, after a process of discernment, to ordain women. The Roman Catholic Church has supported full equality for women in the workplace and political life but has restated its position restricting the priesthood to men. The two women note here that the very process by which churches make decisions, on this question and others, remains a significant cause of the divisions among them.

Beyond the question of ordination, the presenters pointed out that other questions remain in the area of women's issues, even for churches that ordain them. Ordination does not mean full equality; there is also the question of the higher levels of ministry and of participating in decision making at all levels. New ways of imagining the relationships between men and women that recognize the ways that sin vitiates all relationships are needed. Other problems include the persistence of the patristic ideology on the inferiority of women, the fact that women bear the larger responsibility for sexual decision making and for the well being of children, the increasing feminization of poverty and the fact that churches continue to appeal to sources for decision making that have been determined and interpreted without the participation of women.

They suggest, finally, that all the churches need to address the sin of sexism, that women should be integrated equally into the decision-making processes of the churches, and that their own experience be taken into account in the formulation of doctrine, policy and ethical teaching. This is first of all a step toward greater justice within the church and ultimately could help the ecumenical process of reconciliation.

4. The final discussion focused on what the members of the committee had learned from the process. They found that as Catholics and Protestants they held a number of things in common. They were all shaped by their own ecclesial traditions. They shared the Scriptures and tried to interpret Scripture, tradition and experience in

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light of reason. They found that they could and did learn from each other, both as individuals and as churches.

They also found that many of their differences resulted from the different ways that their churches responded to the modern world. Those differences included an inability to agree on how some questions on women's issues and sexual ethics should be classified, how different theological methodologies are rooted in their respective ecclesial traditions and how views of authority differ. Catholics, with a tradition of *obsequium*—variously translated as obedience, assent or deference—to official church teachings, tended to expect detailed moral teachings from the church. Protestants, with a tendency to deny that any human authority was owed such *obsequium*, place more emphasis on a personal relationship with God than authoritative teachings from the church.

Suggestions for the Future. In originally requesting a study, the Secretariat had expressed the hope that it might find ways toward a “common Christian understanding” in the potentially divisive area of ethical questions. In its conclusion, the Los Angeles Ad Hoc Committee suggested two “ground rules” that could be of assistance in any future ecumenical conversation in the area of ethics.

1. A Communal Focus. In urging the retrieval of a communal focus, the committee wanted to stress that ethical values and language are acquired through interaction with a faith community that can provide a rich resource in the effort to respond to contemporary questions: “A recovery and deepened appreciation of the historicality of each of our faith traditions is important lest we ‘forget’ the roots that ground us. The lack of these roots contributes to the sterile individualism and relativism that often substitute for solid ethical analysis.”

2. Discriminating Between Issues of Principle and Matters of Policy. Here the committee took a cue from the recent pastoral letters of the U.S. Catholic bishops on nuclear weapons and the economy. They urged that ecumenical discussions on ethical questions also take care to distinguish between issues of principle and the concrete application that must follow. “Acknowledging these different levels of meaning in ecclesial pronouncements helps to win a broader consensus and recognizes the legitimate differences in interpretation and analysis that can yield contrary opinions. While it may not be possible

to eliminate all debate about ethical matters, it may be helpful to clarify where the differences occur and why they may be appropriate in certain circumstances.”

In November 1987, the committee submitted its report to the Secretariat. Both the report and the process the committee went through offer creative approaches to the question of interchurch cooperation in this difficult area of ethical concerns and, thus, for the question of Christian unity that still eludes us. One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is that some of these issues cannot be resolved without also addressing the larger questions of authority that they raise. ■

An Ancient Glass Medallion

*(Illustrated in Irmgard Hutter's
Early Christian and Byzantine Art)*

*Sixteen centuries pass,
And still on enamelled glass
These portraits etched in gold
Hold one, as they unfold
The candor and confidence
Of pious intelligence
Confronting the Unknown.
Eyes as alive as my own
(But brown, more almond) meet
My seeking. Calm and discreet,
Aware of their heritage
At old Rome's crumbling edge
(Before Sophia had risen
Over Death's broken prison)
They mirror the Trinity
In Christ's fourth century.
Mother and daughter and son,
Three faces struck from one
Elegant mold, assure
Faith of a faith so pure
The medallion can emboss
A later processional cross;
From which gemmed apogee
Gravely they question me,
These eyes, these faces, borne
Forward through fire and thorn
By the devices of art.
They question me to the heart.
And here at Time's tag end
I give, though so faithless a friend,
Priority to the task
Of answering what they ask.*

HAROLD McCURDY