

September 25th, 2009

Dear Archbishop Weisgerber,

Thank you for calling to my attention the concerns that have been raised by at least one Canadian critic regarding my participation in your upcoming plenary meeting. This situation reminds me of one of the most unfortunate features of our U.S. process for approving Supreme Court nominees, namely that any candidate who has a "paper trail," leaves him or herself open to a very selective marshalling of isolated texts for the purpose of creating an ideological caricature. Over the course of my career I have authored seven books and over 100 articles on a wide variety of topics oriented toward very different audiences. Consequently, it is very easy for a person to selectively cite isolated passages from my work in order to create a distorted portrait of widespread dissent.

Let me make a few introductory clarifications regarding my ecclesiastical standing in the U.S. Church. First and foremost, as a condition of my ten year appointment at the University of St. Thomas School of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston, Texas (1991-2001), I received a *mandatum* from Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza. According to the U.S. norms for the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the *mandatum* is "portable" unless explicitly revoked and there has been no attempt by my current bishop to revoke it. I was appointed by the USCCB as a Catholic delegate on our national Catholic-United Methodist ecumenical dialogue and I served on that dialogue for the entire five-year round in 2000-2005. Br. Jeffrey Gros, who staffed that dialogue for the five year term would be happy, I believe, to comment on the character of my participation as would Bishop William Skylstad who served as the first of several chairs of our dialogue team. I have served as a consultant to the conference's sub-committee on marriage and family and in the fall of 2008 I was invited by Bishop Skylstad to give a one day workshop to the bishops and religious superiors of the Northwest United States on the topic of church and culture. I have given clergy conferences and/or spoken at diocesan pastoral conferences, with the approval of the appropriate local (arch)bishops, in the (arch)dioceses of St. Augustine, San Antonio, Sacramento, Salinas, Galveston-Houston, Omaha, Dallas, Lafayette, Richmond, Worcester, Wilmington, Cheyenne, Kansas City-St. Joseph, Albuquerque, St. Cloud, Detroit, Lansing and Los Angeles. I have addressed seminarians at Oblate School of Theology (San Antonio), St. John's Seminary in Camarillo (California), the Catholic Theological Union (Chicago), the Washington Theological Union and St. Meinrad's Seminary in Indiana. I have given a three day workshop to the Canadian Redemptorists and a two day workshop for the U.S. Southern Province of the Dominicans.

Turning now to the concerns raised on the internet blog to which you drew my attention, let me say that a point by point rebuttal of the many accusations would be long and tiresome. Instead, I would like to make some selective responses, and a few unambiguous affirmations that I hope will reassure any within your conference who may have questions regarding my standing as a Catholic theologian.

- The blogger reports that I have offered some public criticisms of the Holy Father's actions with regard to the four Lefebvrite bishops whose excommunications were revoked. This is true, but I would hasten to add that I am hardly alone in such criticisms, indeed many of the Holy Father's most ardent supporters, including Cardinal Schönborn, have offered similar criticisms. Members of the Vatican have themselves since admitted that they did not foresee all of the consequences of their actions. It is our duty as Catholics to always show respect to the Holy Father, the universal pastor of the Church. Surely, however, one can show due respect while also questioning certain prudential actions taken by the pope and/or Vatican staff. The Church's teaching on papal infallibility does not extend to the realm of papal prudential judgment.
- I was indeed a member of President Obama's Catholic advisory board. I served on that board as the result of a carefully considered prudential judgment, in which, having considered the broad range of Catholic social teaching, I concluded, that (then) Senator Obama was the candidate whose views were most likely to further central Catholic convictions across a broad range of issues. *I did not support President Obama's position on abortion* and when I was asked to be on his advisory board, I made it clear to his senior staff that, were I appointed to the board, I would continue to voice my opposition to the senator on that issue. I was told that such criticism would be welcomed and indeed it was. Several of us on the advisory board called time and again for a change in Senator Obama's positions, and we were, I believe, successful in at least moderating his views. This was evident in his recent address to Congress when he asserted that no federal dollars would go to fund abortions and promised to preserve conscience clauses for health care workers. These positions were much debated within his campaign prior to his election and I truly believe that the careful arguments made by our Catholic advisory board to his senior staff played at least a small role in the moderation of his position. Of course other Catholics may believe that my prudential judgment to support Obama was in error, but this judgment did not constitute a break with the Church's doctrinal teaching in any way.
- I am accused of suggesting that an article of faith can become "tentative" if it becomes "controversial." The blogger has grossly distorted my position and frankly, I am not sure that he really understands the technical nuances of the topic I was treating. What I have held is that if there is an article of faith taught infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium that becomes controversial, it may be necessary for its dogmatic status to be asserted in a more self-evident manner, namely by way of solemn definition by either pope or council. Do I believe that the resurrection of the body is a dogma? Of course I do, and I make a profession to that effect at every Sunday Eucharist! However, the belief in the bodily resurrection has never been solemnly defined, but rather has been infallibly taught by the ordinary universal magisterium (the subject of my dissertation and first book!). Were it to be widely challenged, I would expect the pope or a council to clarify its dogmatic status by way of a solemn definition. Consider Vatican I. I would contend that the infallibility of the pope had already been held as an article of faith by the universal church, but the council felt it opportune to clarify any misunderstandings by way of a solemn definition.

- Regarding my position on the ordination of women, I have never challenged the truth of this teaching in any of my work; I *have*, however, addressed the altogether different question of this teaching's authoritative note, and have critically analyzed the claim of the CDF's *Responsum ad Dubium* that this teaching has been taught infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium. My reservations have been echoed by far more distinguished scholars such as Fr. Francis Sullivan who was for thirty years on the faculty of the Gregorianum and, I suspect, taught many in your own conference!
- I am accused of telling Catholics to follow their consciences on matters of artificial contraception. Ultimately, of course, all genuine moral action demands that we engage our consciences, but matters are not that simple. In fact, in my book on marriage I spent 3 ½ pages defending the church's position on contraception, after which I also suggested that no one should question the sincerity of those who struggle with the Church's teaching and I briefly summarized their views as well. However, I then concluded with the following statement:

For Roman Catholics, the teaching of *Humanae vitae* is authoritative and ought not be dismissed or ignored. Catholics must make a good faith effort to embrace the official teaching of the church, and they should insure that if they have difficulties with this teaching, these difficulties do not stem from either an inadequate understanding of the church's teaching or an unwillingness to live according to the often demanding norms of Christian life. (90).

- At key points your blogger relies on an even more misleading document that has been floating around the internet for several years. In some cases the blatant misrepresentation of my views by the author of that document can only be seen as intentional and malicious. For example, it is suggested that I agree with Hans Küng in his rejection of Vatican I's teaching on papal infallibility. Anyone who fairly reads my work would have to come to the opposite conclusion, namely that I thought Küng was fundamentally mistaken in his understanding of the teaching of Vatican I. However, so that there may be no doubt, let me say without reservation that I firmly embrace as a dogma of the church everything that Vatican I taught in *Pastor Aeternus* and that Vatican II reasserted regarding the infallibility of the pope in *Lumen Gentium* # 25. Elsewhere the author warns that I deny that there are any solemnly defined dogmas that pertain to morals. That is true, but the key to my position is found in the words "solemnly defined." I have clearly affirmed that there are dogmas that pertain to morality that were taught by the ordinary universal magisterium and I cite Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae*, where he concludes that the condemnation of abortion and euthanasia qualify as non-defined dogmas. The author also attacks me for citing the work of suspect theologians like Charles Curran and Joseph Fuchs. I do draw on specific contributions they have made; doing so must never be construed, however, as a sweeping statement of support for all of their positions. Even dissenting theologians can offer insight and it is only the ignorant who refuse to entertain *any* of the views of theologians whose positions may be problematic regarding a particular topic.

To continue my rebuttal would require a much longer document. I hope that what I have said here will suffice to reassure you that I am a faithful Catholic theologian who fully embraces the teaching office of the pope and bishops.

If further testimony regarding my theological standing is needed, I would invite you to contact two respected Canadian theologians with whom I have worked extensively, Prof. Catherine Clifford of St. Paul's in Ottawa and Prof. Margaret O'Gara of the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto. Other bishops with whom I have worked in the US who I trust would testify to my good standing would include my own bishop, Leonard Blair, Cardinal Roger Mahoney (Los Angeles), Bishop William Skylstad (Spokane, past president of the USCCB) Bishop Donald Trautman (Erie), Bishop Victor Galeone (St. Augustine), Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk (Cincinnati), Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza (now retired, Galveston-Houston, past president of the USCCB), Archbishop Elden Curtis (now retired, Omaha) and Bishop Robert McManus (Worcester). Finally, the pastor of my own parish, Fr. James Bacik, himself an accomplished theologian, would be happy to discuss my standing with you.

To practice theology is something different than to practice catechetics; the task of the theologian will at times stand in a fruitful and constructive tension with the task of the magisterium, but both play important, albeit quite different, roles in the life of the Church. A theologian's work must at times be critical—critical of certain theological trajectories, critical of certain ecclesiastical structures and practices, even critical of certain doctrinal formulations (distinguished from the substance of the deposit of faith)—but this critical role must be undertaken within the context of a real humility before the mystery of the revelation of God's love for us in Jesus Christ and a genuine respect for the teaching office of the Church. I strive in all that I do to maintain the requisite humility and respect.

If there is anything else I might be able to offer you to help resolve any lingering issues, please let me know.

Sincerely,

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