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Dissent and the Future of the Church

Cover Page Footnote

Sidney Callahan has held visiting chairs of interdisciplinary studies and moral theology at Georgetown University and St. John's University. This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on September 29, 2004, as part of a year-long series of symposia on The Church and the Contemporary World, sponsored by the Center for Catholic Thought, Ethics, and Culture.

SIDNEY CALLAHAN

Dissent and the Future of the Church

Thank you for inviting me to speak in your series of symposia on "Catholics in Contention." Recently the signs of the times have been pointing to an endless hurricane season. Many historians of the American Church have judged the present crisis is a turning point in our future; never before has there been so much distress, disarray, and conflict among its membership. Day after day Catholics have had to read the paper and wince over the shaming news of sex abuse scandals, corruption, and failures of leadership.

One effect of the turmoil has been a renewed focus on church reform and renewal as urgently necessary. But once again this produces more conflict since there are many different diagnoses and recommendations offered by different parties. Inevitably, when debating the future of the American Catholic Church the question of dissent is debated. Three topics come under scrutiny:

1. What is the meaning of dissent since Vatican II?
2. What has been the role of dissent in the ongoing tradition of the Catholic Church?
3. How can an individual or a group cope with dissent?

Naturally, since all of these topics are concerns of my own I cannot help but draw upon my own life experience. Experience has

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been recognized as one of the four main sources of insight and authority in the Church, along with scripture, traditional teaching, and reason. Experience is perhaps the most slippery and controversial source but also the most inevitable and all-pervasive. My own experience is that of an enthusiastic and grateful Roman Catholic convert. I was received just before Vatican II and still feel confirmed and inspired by the Church's great council. In the forty years since the Council, I have been supported and inspired by the faith, in both my professional and private life. I am married, with a family of six grown children, and over the years have taught psychology and moral theology while writing many articles and books. During this most fortunate life, I have been enlightened by great theologians and spiritually strengthened by a host of other exemplary Catholics I've met – in my parishes and in wider Church circles.

In addition to these rosy experiences in the faith, I have also been saddened to see family members and friends leave the Church. A few departees experience "counter conversions," but most fade away quietly, citing deep disaffection with Church teachings. I can understand this because I started out in a secular, anti-Catholic Southern home, and over the decades I, too, have found myself disagreeing with Vatican pronouncements or teachings, usually related to sex, gender, and the role of authority. These personal experiences are most discouraging when they seem to point to the Church's regression from the gospel-spirit of the Second Vatican Council. My response as a Vatican II Catholic is to work harder for Church reform.

Now as we come to the recent sex abuse scandals the situation of disarray in the Church increases. Our plight cannot be explained away or excused by saying that the Church is a Church of sinners, or that it was worse under the Borgias. Yes, sin and weakness we always have with us, and we are constantly in need of purification, but it has also become clear that a great deal of intellectual dissent and fundamental theological disagreement exists within the Church. Dissent is building up to a crisis. From hurricanes we may be descending into a worse period of strife, what the Irish have called "the troubles." Which brings me to the first point of defining dissent in and out of the Church. Dissent has both negative and positive forms.

I

Dissent in the dictionary is defined as "to differ in sentiment or opinion, especially from the majority; to withhold assent." Dissent can only arise because of the self-conscious human ability to give assent, or consent, to a claim. "Yes" implies the ability to say "no." Humans are free to consider alternative scenarios and make judgments, decisions, and moral commitments, as well as change their minds. In Christianity, a person becomes a disciple by saying "yes" to Jesus Christ as the Word of God; and you become a Roman Catholic by saying "yes" to the Church as the Body of Christ. A member assents, consents, and is committed to the Church's claims as a communion. Many models and metaphors are used to describe the rich, multi-leveled reality of the Catholic Church, but it is at least a voluntary association, "a spiritual communion of persons bound together by a common faith and a common love of God," as theologian Richard R. Gaillardetz says in *By What Authority?* "Voluntary" and "association" are key words in our modern self-conscious culture.

Adult Catholics in America are freely consenting members of the Church. They may have been baptized as infants, but at some point they make a decision to identify themselves as Catholics in some fashion. They are not coerced by the sword or the state or social pressure, or a fear of hellfire. Active, practicing Catholics in the pews are there because they choose to be. Even Catholic mothers and grandmothers can no longer force anyone to remain Catholic!

No one can be moral for another person or give an internal assent of heart and mind of faith for another. Today many devout families mourn the fact that their adult children have gone missing from the Church. For many of those that depart there is not much hope that they are going to be among the returnees. The old saying is *not* true that "once a Catholic, always a Catholic." A great deal of anti-Catholicism exists in the culture at large (anti-Catholicism is as American as apple pie), and it can confirm those who leave in their disaffection and dissent.

Ex-Catholics come in different flavors and dissent in different ways. The general lack of effective religious instruction in the society ensures that misunderstandings of Church teaching go unchecked. Ironically, many so called recovering Catholics claim to disagree with doctrines that the Church has never taught, or hasn't taught for decades, or even centuries. Other nostalgic ex-Catholics paradoxically

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dissent while complaining about recent reforms in the Church; the Church they think, should remain frozen as the institution that they had to leave, but oh, how they miss Gregorian chant, Latin, and the old certitude. Still the worst dissenters out there are those bitter ex-Catholics who regularly hurl contempt at the Church – also getting doctrines wrong a lot of the time. I think here of Christopher Hitchens, who writes for *Vanity Fair* and felt called to write a book attacking Mother Teresa.²

Despite these problems, it at least remains clear to the culture at large that no one can be a Catholic alone. A renewed understanding of the Church as a community has become ever more evident since Vatican II. As Cardinal Ratzinger said when talking about the role of theologians in the Church, “The truth of faith is not given to isolated individuals . . . God wanted to give life to a history and to a people. The truth is located in the communitarian subject of the People of God.”³

The faith is given and revealed to the whole People of God. Every baptized Catholic is called to faith and to action, belief, and practice in dialogue and communion with everyone else. “Here comes everybody” is how James Joyce defined Catholicism, so everybody’s belief and practice make up that common “sense of the faithful” that is passed from generation to generation. Teachings that are not received into the canon by the whole Church and communicated in its life and practice are not considered validly taught. This is the “doctrine of reception,” a doctrine that teaching authorities do not often promulgate – for obvious reasons. The reclaimed understanding of the communal sense of the faithful and the doctrine of reception has shifted Catholic understanding of authority away from feudal and one-way, linear hierarchies in which clerics are identified as the real Church. Today, after Vatican II, we view the Church as consisting of dynamically interacting roles and resources consisting of the magisterium’s teaching office, the work of theologians, and the beliefs and practices of the People of God. Local churches are not provincial outposts of an imperial center, but are each full instances of the Church. The churches are all in communion with one another and the center, much like the bouncing electrons of the atom. We have moved from vertical to horizontal images of collegiality, from static to dynamic visions.

At the same time we have to avoid distorted modern concepts of the Church viewing it as one more global corporation with a CEO at the top supervising local Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises. To meet their market niche, local franchises have to be standardized and conform to a uniform pattern without diversity. What difficulty the Church always has in not conforming to the world! It is always in need of being transformed by the spirit of Christ.

With the need of transformation firmly in mind, a positive role for dissent within the Church can be discerned. Such dissent from the faithful within has been called "loyal dissent," "responsible dissent," "creative dissent," "fraternal correction," or "evangelical criticism." It takes the gospel as the rule for the Church, and criticism is given in order to build up the Church. Such loyal dissent arises from the love of members who desire the Church to be "the world turned inside out," a light of God's love, truth, and justice shining in the dark world. This creative dissent or fraternal correction does not question the core doctrines of the good news of Christianity, but does disagree at times with less central teachings.

Today theologians describe what is called "the hierarchy of truths," but these gradations and degrees of authoritative theological affirmations could also be described more horizontally as ranging from an inner core of necessary doctrines to surrounding circles of less essential elements. The innermost core beliefs of the faith are irreversible or infallible teachings that have been honed in councils and codified in common creeds, canons, and classic texts. These teachings are sure paths and grounds for our salvation. Outer circles can be matters of Church discipline or prudential admonitions. The point is that there are different degrees of assent required of Christians, and therefore different degrees of potential dissent.

Theologians name these different gradations as dogmas, definitive doctrines, authoritative doctrines, and prudential admonitions. However, theologians are constantly debating which teachings belong in which categories. At the same time theological reflection continues to try and understand more adequately even the core meanings of the gospel good news. Interpretations of a central doctrine or belief can be understood differently and in greater depth with the advent of new understandings of scripture or science or human culture. In a living, lively, ever-reforming, ever-changing, life-giving stream of tradition,

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change is constant – which brings us to the way dissent operates in an evolving tradition.

II

Today we recognize with Newman that “to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Doctrines evolve through time in many different ways. In the growth process, some earlier interpretations of the faith are shaken off as no longer appropriate. Newman spoke of this, but my own home-grown image for this process comes from human development: baby teeth must be discarded at a certain stage of growth in order to make room for the arrival of adult molars. One of our greatest modern theologians, Karl Rahner, has made a similar point. He notes that some teachings and customs in the Church developed in symbiosis with the assumed beliefs of a historical period and place, while other teachings develop in a synthesis “that sets up a reality of natural experience as a secondary and derived object of faith.”⁴ Discerning which is which is the challenge of faith. I certainly see remnants of Roman imperial theory and practice around, along with the mindset of petty Renaissance courts. But the development of human equality, human rights, and teachings of social justice are a synthesis derived from core gospel affirmations. Of course, at any present moment it may be unclear what is happening until more time has passed, with its testing and communal theological reflection.

Creative dissent plays a large role in the testing and development of tradition. Today theologians are examining and analyzing the operation of tradition with the same subtlety and care as scripture scholars have employed in interpreting scripture. No Catholic theologian today interprets scripture from a narrow literal fundamentalist point of view. Just as in understanding the complexities of scripture, a literal fundamentalist approach to Church tradition no longer suffices. One excellent example of the new analysis of tradition is found in John E. Thiel's book, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith*.⁵ Catholic theology, Thiel claims, unlike certain forms of Protestant thought, does not collapse tradition into scripture. Both scripture and tradition have their own integrity in revealing God's truth. Tradition as a source of revelation functioned

prior to the formation of the scriptural canon and has continued as a complementary source for comprehending God's single revelation. Tradition, taken in its plain literal sense, includes all the formal written decrees of councils, encyclicals, and so on, but it also includes all of those practices and beliefs that have been handed down in the universal church. In addition to the literal sense, Thiel describes three other senses, or ways, to interpret tradition. All are needed and can have a role.

One sense is a "development-in-continuity," as past doctrines gradually change while being newly appropriated by each generation. (This constant reappropriation of memory seems to give meaning to Paul Ricoeur's wonderful phrase "the neo-past.") An implicit kind of dissent can operate here in what is quietly dropped out of teaching or practice. But two other more dynamic senses of tradition give an understanding of how dissent, radical reform, renewal, and change take place in the church. Thiel describes a sense of tradition that he labels "dramatic development," which can include discontinuity and reversals. For instance, certain magisterial teachings that were firmly entrenched for centuries were swept away in the proclamations of Vatican II. Think of how the long-established teachings against religious liberty of conscience were reversed as well as declarations that outside the Church there is no salvation. Before these Church developments were articulated and accepted at the Council, many persons had dissented from the earlier doctrines – and often they had been censured by Roman authorities.

The most intriguing sense of tradition described by Thiel is an "incipient" or "anticipatory" sense of development which leads to renewal. In a living communion striving to become attuned to Christ and the Holy Spirit, new insight into God's good news can emerge in some local group that anticipates the future development of the universal church. Some minority of faithful at the margin may produce a novel and contested interpretation of tradition. Gradual acceptance of the new perspective throughout the Church then moves the new thinking to the center, where it become assimilated into the church's universal consensus. We might think here of the changes in attitudes on slavery, the Jews, ecumenical overtures, women's equality, and the nature of marriage. Each new movement from the margins is marked by initial dissent against the status quo or reigning assumptions.

Resistance eventually gives way. Dissent fuels the future development.

I find Thiel's affirmation of a dynamic plural movement of the Holy Spirit through time and culture to be true to the gospels and true to the chaos and complexity of history. Such ideas of development also echo current evolutionary understandings of the universe in which stability and gradual continuous change through small mutations are complemented by sudden discontinuities and extinctions that allow new species to spread and dominate. A certain amount of disorder and chaos is necessary to actualize every potential for creative change. While all interpretations of tradition in the Church yearn for the Spirit's One Truth in perfect unity, within a wholly coherent and pluralistic network, Christians should not pretend to possess an abstract eternal order that is false to reality. This side of the eschaton, the creative Spirit pours forth living water, filled with novelty. Today we have also reclaimed an appreciation of God's continuing creation. The whole creation is struggling toward fulfillment in a great childbirth. New evolutionary theologians, like John Haught, speak of how we are all moving toward God our Future.

The challenge for each generation, who are not there yet, is discernment. What is now, and what will be, a living part of the Church's future canon? When lack of assent to some teaching begins to appear, and arguments fail to convince dissenting lay persons, theologians, and some bishops, a dramatic development may be taking place. To quickly label all dissent as disloyalty or the sin of dissension – much less heresy or apostasy, as literal fundamentalists tend to do – may be a failure to discern an incipient development inspired by the Spirit.

III

Knowing the way the Spirit works through history, providing both continuity and novelty, helps us as individuals cope with dissent. We have to test whatever is taught. The gospels speak of testing to find what is sound, and the advice is to judge a tree, or a human heart, by its fruits. Reflection requires engaging in back and forth argument and discussion. What is at issue and what degree of authority is involved? If in the end I must dissent in good conscience from a teaching, I do so in the hope that I am anticipating where the Spirit is leading the

Church.

But then, as a Christian realist, I recognize that I may be wrong and misguided. The existence of human pride, self-deception, and tendencies to be co-opted by the world make one test one's own conclusions. I might be as wrongheaded as those first persons who persuaded the popes to accept the Inquisition or allow slavery. Regressions, decline, and corruption of Church teachings are also possible. Protection comes from the cultivation of important virtues such as humility, perseverance, and courage. Humility means remaining teachable as you seek truth; perseverance keeps you working toward truth; and courage is necessary to stand up for truth and face down conflicts that come.

In my own case I would have to say that dissent comes to me as I am going along on my life pilgrimage. Either a slowly emerging sense of dis-ease arises or a clap of distressing insight may suddenly appear. This is captured in a phrase from the children's book *Madeleine* (one of the joys of raising a granddaughter is encountering children's literature all over again): "In the middle of one night, Miss Clavel turned on her light and said, 'Something is not right!'"

Once I was assigned to write an article on the marriage laws in the Church, and it was a revelation. I felt like I had lifted a rock and seen the worms crawling below. I must admit that with that particular rock I lowered it forthwith. But slowly and surely, despite denials, I can become aware that this or that teaching I am being instructed to believe is not right; it just doesn't seem true. It seems false to the Christ of scripture, or to earlier traditions, or to my reason, or to my life experience and the testimony of the wise and good. I am furthered in my dissent when theologians and some bishops also agree with my position.

But first off, as an obedient listening member of the Church I will give a benefit of doubt to the teaching or pronouncement. I will begin to inquire what the teaching really means in context, and then what is its degree of importance and authoritative status. If, after reflection I decide that the Church appears to be unfaithful to God's loving will and truth, I must dissent. First privately, and then if appropriate I may publicly voice my dissent.

This obligation to dissent becomes imperative when people are being hurt. I have to speak up and work for change in the most

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effective way I can find, which depends on who I am and my state of life. I may join in reform and renewal groups. I have worked with many reform groups and with official Church committees. One high point of the latter work was participating in a conference on women's health sponsored by the Vatican in Rome. The more public my role the more I must be willing to dissent, despite the consequences. Dissent can be difficult for those in vulnerable positions, but if they love the Church they will persist.

A Catholic who loyally dissents has to make extra efforts to pray, to go to the sacraments, to seek counsel, and engage in all the other paths to holiness that the Church gives us. Overcoming anger at opponents is crucial, especially if they are persecuting you as disloyal and destructive to the Church. Here we can remember Jesus, who dissented from the reigning authorities and was killed. Before his execution he was slandered, rejected, and persecuted. Many other great dissenters, such as that astounding girl, Joan of Arc, had their causes eventually vindicated, but not before being burned at the stake. We may only face being gossiped about and disapproved of.

While in a dissenting position a person of faith has to continually seek dialogue and engagement with others who disagree. Cardinal Bernadin's Catholic Common Ground Initiative is a particularly important work. This respectful give and take is the only way to persuasion, the only way reform and renewal in the Church comes about. Reconciliations of conflict have always been the fruit of charity, dialogue, and willingness to listen. Christians have faith in the process because they believe that truth is great and will prevail, and that love overcomes all.

Hope in the future of the Church comes from faith in God as a God of surprises. I think of God's good news revealed as a rich, multi-thematic symphony playing through time into God's future. Rock-like constancy and coherence as well as emerging new melodies are necessary. I believe that more is always coming. More can be expected. We can trust the One Who makes all things new, sometimes happily known as She Who Is.

Notes

1. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), p. 142.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (New York: Verso, 1997).
3. Quoted by Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, p. 139.
4. Karl Rahner, "On Angels," *Theological Investigations*, volume XIX.
5. John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).