Occasional Commentary
In a profound and perceptive article, later incorporated into a fine little book, Louis Dupré has given us much to think about.¹ He raises an issue which any liturgical theologian must face sooner or later: the correlation of silence and speech in the language of worship, and so, in the language of theology. He writes:

Those who enjoy the closest familiarity with God are the most reluctant to be loose-lipped about him. But sooner or later the question arises: How can we continue to use words at that point? Is silence the end? Is a purely negative theology itself not a “creaturely” approach to God? Should it not, at some point, abandon also its own creaturely reservations and in the absence of words of its own listen to the Word that God himself has spoken? . . . should we not say that in God’s silence I hear the Word, in his darkness I see the Light, in his rest I enjoy his active Love?²

In an article written by such a quintessentially Catholic philosopher of religion like Dupré, this is an unexpected thing to find. First of all, the very etymology of the noun “mystery” reminds us of the significance of deliberate, eloquent silence in liturgical celebrations;³ a scholar like Dupré, whose religious sensibilities were shaped by the Roman liturgy, must be presumed to appreciate the significance of silence in worship. Even more is it to be presumed that Dupré is aware that the philosophical and theological traditions of the West have found it imperative to have recourse to apophaticism in the service of speaking of God;⁴ Thomas Aquinas himself can close one of his treatises with a nearly literal quotation from a famous decree promulgated by the fourth Council of the Lateran (1215 A.D.), which goes so far as to suggest that the element of negativity enjoys pride of place in language about God:
the measure of human and divine perfection is not the same. For no likeness, no matter how great, can obtain between the Creator and the creature, without there being found right there an unlikeness which is greater. This is so because the creature is at an infinite distance from God.

No wonder we find young Aquinas explaining, in his Commentary on Peter Lombard’s Sentences, that

when we proceed towards God on the road of removal, we first deny everything corporeal of God. Then we deny everything spiritual as it is found in creatures, such as goodness and wisdom. At that point, all that is left in our minds is that God is, and nothing else; thus God is, in a kind of perplexing fashion, so to speak. Last of all, however, we remove from God even this very being according as it occurs in creatures. At that point, God is left to dwell in a kind of darkness of ignorance; yet after the manner of this ignorance—at least as long as we are on our present way—we are best united with God, as Dionysius says. It is a dark of sorts, in which God is said to dwell.

Why, then, should Dupré wish to revise a tradition that goes back to the Cappadocians? Why does he want to commend what looks like naiveté in naming God?

The answer is as simple as it is profound. Dupré’s suggestion raises the stunning possibility that our habit of imposing on ourselves an absolute silence in matters pertaining to the knowledge of God may be the very opposite of docta ignorantia; it may betray a residual intellectual self-regard that is inappropriate in the Presence of God.

Let us explain the implications of Dupré’s proposal. Meister Eckhart insists that the definitive form of the knowledge of God is utter silence. If Dupré should be right, it would follow that Eckhart’s position is all-too-human, since it would imply that human intelligence is the tribunal of last appeal to decide what language suits the living God and what doesn’t. And as a matter of fact, it turns out that Dupré asks us to entertain the possibility that John Tauler, and even more Jan van Ruusbroec, are not just closer to the Great Tradition (which has boldly
spoken of God in explicitly trinitarian terms), but also superior to Eckhart in philosophical subtlety. Dupré writes:

John Tauler . . . shows how the Trinity inhabits the soul. . . . “We should learn to find the Trinity in ourselves and realize we are in a real way formed according to its image.” . . . Even in its natural state the soul, however imperfect, bears this divine image. Being a finite reflection of that perfect Image of God’s self-expression, the soul participates in the divine life of the Son. Spiritual progress consists “in recognizing this blessed image in ourselves above all things.”

In sum, Dupré argues that Ruusbroec’s explicit, articulate trinitarianism is not so much the Christian stepping-stone toward apophatic theology as its inseparable, co-equal friend. The Christian tradition has tacitly endorsed this conviction by acting on it: it has not hesitated to speak of God in trinitarian terms, right in the teeth of its own insistence that God is essentially incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτος). How can this be accounted for?

To understand this, we have to start by recalling that the undivided Jewish and Christian Tradition of faith in God is a tradition of glorification, from protological start to eschatological finish:

. . . in his temple the cry is: “Glory!” Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of powers: the whole earth is full of his Glory. (Ps 29, 9; Is 6, 3)

Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord of all . . . You are worthy, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power . . . You are worthy to receive the scroll and break its seals . . . Praise and honor, glory and might, to the One who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb, forever! (Rev 4, 8. 11; 5, 9. 13)

Let us reflect. Praise and thanksgiving are abandon, not cultivation of self. They are ecstatic before they ever give rise to thought. They lift humanity to the peak of the cosmos and its worship, and in this very act of worship humanity finds its transcendental attunement to God (i.e., its radical participation in God) actualized to the fullest available
extent. Yet, *pace* the apophatic tradition, articulate cataphatic praise and thanksgiving very much drive home the realization that God is *semper maior*. In that sense, dedicated speech accomplishes the same as what is accomplished by the posture of speechless awe before God.

This leads to conclusions about apophatic theology. In the Christian tradition, apophaticism it is first of all a response. Like glorification in words, it acknowledges: “God, You are God.” In other words, in the Christian tradition apophaticism is a form of worship; it is not a free-standing, autonomous, self-authenticating form of human religiosity. At root, apophaticism proceeds not so much from humanity’s realization of the inadequacy of its own conception of God as from its awe at finding itself placed before and encompassed by God. This awe is also the point made by articulate Jewish and Christian *cataphasis*:

> We will say a lot, and we never arrive; the sum of what we say is: the All—He is it. Glorifying him, at what point will we be up to it? For he is the Great One; beyond compare, above all his works. The Lord is awesome and terribly great; wonderful is his sustained power. Glorify the Lord as much as you can, for he will always be higher. As you extol him, muster all your strength; be untiring, for you never arrive. (Sir 43, 27-30 [lxx])

Thus the inspiration to praise God affirmatively, in speech and not by silence alone, comes from awe; even as we utter God’s praises we realize that no matter how much we glorify God in explicit words, there will always be more to say. Apophaticism is built right into the explicit, expressive language of praise and thanksgiving.

Let us sum up. The Great Tradition tacitly claims that human language is capable of cataphatic affirmations that leave God’s incomprehensibility intact.

However, the claim just made raises a serious fundamental question. From a linguistic point of view, is it legitimate to propose that affirmative language leaves God’s incomprehensibility intact? Let us try.

We live in a culture which glorifies information and data. Large numbers of educated people tend to think you either know exactly “what you’re talking about” or you don’t. In latter case, you “hypothesize,” “do research,” and “collect data,” to find “solutions” and “answers”). The method is practical (or at least common practice). It is
hardly subtle. Why? We tend to overlook Aristotle’s warning, to the effect that our knowledge

will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions.9

In such a denotative world, pleas for ethics (especially of the contractual, just-play-by-the-rules kind) can still be heard (if rarely followed con amore). By contrast, pleas in favor of value-driven ethics are seldom heard. Why? Because it takes a commitment to a shared system of moral values and priorities conscientiously endorsed to arrive at a moral consensus rather than a merely pragmatic one. Yet experience teaches us that appeals to conscience are invariably used to assert individual rights and justify individual decisions.

In this rational, contractual context, material value ethics are hard to come by. What is in even scarcer supply is agreement on the tacit foundation of any value-based ethic: the sense that the moral sense is not self-supporting. In the end, moral living is predicated on a sense of mystery. But in a world of denotation, appeals to “mystery” sound irrational and naive; they are “medieval,” “vague” and not “practical.” In other words, where denotation reigns supreme, wisdom and considered judgment are scarcely part of “objective” or “useful” learning, and prayer even less (not to mention contemplative prayer).10

What is far less well realized today is this: we use words symbolically, and we do so all the time, even today. We often speak and write to convey, with an odd immediacy, something different from what our words signify, denotatively or connotatively. Let us give a linguistic account of this.

We begin by recalling that meaning is not the prerogative of words taken singly. True, the fact that words taken by themselves can signify apart from context or particular situations is one of the marvels of language. But normally words convey meaning not by themselves, but in clusters; reading dictionaries from cover to cover is not a habit of the mentally healthy. Only together with other words do single words reliably refer to realities out-there. In that sense, too, “the meaning of words is determined by the company they keep” (Ludwig Wittgenstein). In religious language, clustering typically occurs in two
different (though related) “figures of speech”: metaphor and paradox. This invites clarification.

Those among us who have ever harbored, or muttered under our breath, or actually uttered sentiments like “A real toad!” or “A real honeybun!” know that these phrases not only connote a few exquisite feelings on their part, but also refer to an intensely-present reality out-there. However, they do not do so by ordinary denotation. Instead, “toad” and “honeybun” are metaphors. Metaphors are “figures of speech,” but this makes them anything but meaningless, harmless, bloodless, or less able to refer to truths. For metaphors say more, not less. They help us refer to and deal with realities more compelling than mere denotation is apt or able to convey. Just think about “My shepherd is the Lord.”

Paradoxes have one thing in common with metaphors: they, too, refer to “compelling realities out-there.” But in paradoxes the reference results from the complete vacuum of denotative meaning created by the clash of opposites. One example is T.S. Eliot’s powerful evocation of Christ as the “wounded surgeon” plying “the steel that questions the distempered part” (East Coker, in Four Quartets, iv). Gerard Manley Hopkins, in addressing God, weds metaphor to paradox to create a sense of God’s mysterious presence:

Be adored among men,
God, Three-numberèd form;

. . . . . . . . . .

Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue,
Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
Father and fondler of heart Thou hast wrung;
Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.

(The Wreck of the Deutschland, 9)

In light of such texts, why not consider it reasonable, even today, to join Hamlet, face to face with his father’s ghost? Caught between the Great Tradition (which knew of dreams and visions) and the New Learning (which had come to consider them purely mental) he said:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I.v.166-67)
A twentieth-century American woman with a sharp pen, intensely Catholic instincts, a splendid love of the truth, and an uncanny flair for the difference between plain truth and learned humbug, Flannery O’Connor, puts it differently, but no less incisively. To an inquiring friend she writes:

_Dogma can in no way limit a limitless God._ The person outside the Church attaches a different meaning to it than the person in. For me a dogma is only _a gateway to contemplation_ and is _an instrument of freedom_ and not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind.

And to drive the point home, she adds, with characteristic sassiness:

Henry James said the young woman of the future would know nothing of mystery or manners. He had no business to limit it to one sex.¹²

Point made. But in this case, the point made is not to add to what we have learned from Geoffrey Wainwright, but to honor what he has taught us. And to honor him.

Notes


3. The Greek noun μυστήριον is derived from the verb μύω. Any good Greek dictionary will inform us that μύω means “to close one’s eyes” or “to close one’s mouth.” But what does that mean? Let us try. Μύω means: “observing the kind of silence that becomes so eloquent that it elicits the kind of speech that reveals the Truth (while at the same time veiling it), and thus creates room for a sacred silence once again, inclusive, pregnant with truth, and intolerant of falsehood.” This is not a translation, of course, but a periphrasis; it sins by prolixity, but it conveys the true meaning.


5. Expositio super secundam Decretalem (Opuscula theologica I, ed. Marietti, nr. 1198): “Non tamen est idem modus perfectionis humanae et divinae, quia non potest esse tanta similitudo inter Creatorem et creaturam, quin major inveniatur ibi dissimilitudo, propter hoc quod creatura in infinitum distat a Deo.” Cf. Denziger-Schönmetzer 806.

6. In I Sent., 8, 1, 1, ad 4: “quando in Deum procedimus per viam remotionis, primo negamus ab eo corporalia; et secundo etiam intellectualia, secundum quod inveniuntur in creaturis, ut bonitas et sapientia; et tunc remanet tantum in intellectu nostro, quia est, et nihil amplius: unde est sicut in quadam confusione. Ad ultimum autem etiam hoc ipsum esse, secundum quod est in creaturis, ab ipso removemus; et tunc remanet in quadam tenebra ignorantiae, secundum quam ignorantiam, quantum ad statum viæ pertinet, optime Deo coniungimur . . . et hac est quaedam caligo, in qua Deus habitare dicitur.” The last phrase alludes to Solomon’s words at the temple dedication according to the Vulgate (2 Chron 6, 1): “Dominus pollicitus est, ut habitaret in caligine.”

7. Dupré adds that Eckhart runs the risk of placing God’s unity beyond the Father—i.e., beyond God’s trinity. He might have added that Eckhart also gives in to the West’s long-standing bias in the direction a philosophic, monistic, modalist monotheism in trinitarian theology. Strikingly (but not really surprisingly), this very conception of monotheism has been called into doubt in works by two great Jewish thinkers: Martin Buber’s Ich und Du, and (with splendid indignation) Emmanuel Lévinas’s Totalité et infiniété.

8. Dupré, “From Silence to Speech,” 33 (italics added for emphasis). Readers familiar with Cappadocian theology will notice that Tauler here retrieves—intentionally or coincidentally—the understanding of the Son as “archetype” (ἀρχέτυπος: the stamped image on a coin).


10. What has been explained can also be put as follows: we live in a culture that admires denotation. However, theologically and philosophically speaking, we cannot speak of God in denotative ways. We do not have any handles on
God; we have no purchase on God, which would allow us to speak denotatively. Yet the culture we live in loves denotation. No wonder many will say that knowing and speaking of God is a matter of feeling: they will suggest that we speak of God only by connotation, and in fact we often do. That connotation is a factor at every level of human communication is, of course, well known, and interpreting faith in God in terms of pure feeling has interesting credentials in Romanticism. The problem is that the feeling elements in language both spoken and written cannot so easily be separated from the rational elements. So when we are told connotation signifies the “irrational part” of human communication we are skating on thin ice; for feeling is a quality of what we say, not a “part.” Besides, believers claim that faith in God is not only deeply felt, but also reasonable, as well as a call to responsible action. To account for the “knowledge” of God on the basis of connotation alone is to ignore that all connotation is parasitical on denotation and performance. On “performative” language, see J.L. Austin’s classic How to do Things with Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

11. In terms of structural linguistics, what happens in metaphors is “the disjunctive (or selective) application of meaning-elements.” To clarify this, let us explain ex contrario. Take the two sample phrases, and assume that, instead of yourself, the speakers are, respectively, a zoologist and a pastry-baker. In their several contexts, odds are that the entire complex of meaning-elements of “toad” and “honeybun” would apply, respectively, to an (ungainly) little animal or to an (attractive) piece of confection. After all, amphibologists and pastry-bakers are apt to refer to an actual toad and a honeybun almost every day. In other words, they would use the two words denotatively; they would apply all the meaning-elements of “toad” or “honeybun” together (“conjunctively”) to the amphibian or the piece of pastry. In metaphors, however, only a few selected meaning-elements—the “relevant” ones—are applied, either to the unpleasant person or to the attractive one. But that application is all the more forceful for being selective. Less denotation means stronger reference. Would you not rather deal with a little unpleasant amphibian croaking sotto voce and scrambling around your office than with a colleague you cordially detest, and is a charming friend not infinitely better company than the sweetest bun?

Twenty-Three Points on the Ordination of Women

1
The issue of the ordination of women to the diaconate, the priesthood, and the episcopate is primarily not a doctrinal, but a discretionary one. Far from relegating the issue to a secondary status, the discretionary nature of the issue puts it at the heart of what the Church is all about.

2
None of the existing doctrinal justifications of the exclusion of women from Holy Orders are compelling; rather, they tend to appear, on closer hermeneutical inspection, to be nothing but doctrinal involutions of time-determined cultural habits.

3
In particular, the justification of the exclusion of women from Holy Orders on the basis of the christological argument (“By God’s own revealed will it takes a male to be the shepherd of the Church.”) is not just dubious, but downright close to heresy, since it places masculinity in a privileged position in the hypostatic union, contrary to the teaching of the Church, which has held, ever since the Cappadocians, that the Word assumed the human nature “without the individual characteristics.”

4
The only doctrine that applies is the doctrine of God’s all-inclusive love, as implied, e.g., in the baptismal formula of the letter to the Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is . . . neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3, 25). Hence, all human persons can become the bearers of Christ’s person and of his ministries. But then, doctrine is not everything.
Hence, the doctrinal arguments in favor of the exclusion of women from, or inclusion in, the ministry fail to convince. Therefore, if any reasons in favor of either are to be found, they will have to come from ‘agapeic’ considerations. These will appear in the form of discretionary judgments born out of the desire to show concern for the weak and the wronged. An analogy is afforded by Paul’s treatment of the eating of meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8, 1-13; 10, 23-11, 1) in spite of his realization that “an idol has no real existence” (1 Cor 8, ). Since “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8, 1), the issue of women’s Orders, seen as an agapeic question, is part of the central concern of the Church.

There are good reasons to claim that the very agap which, in the tradition, provided some compelling arguments in favor of the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry, now favors their inclusion. However, it is possible to see this only if the tradition is viewed, not as culpably unaware of the fact that women were the object of discrimination, but as invincibly ignorant on this score. To appreciate this, two other assumptions are necessary.

The long-standing discrimination against women, justified by philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories, and shown in such degenerative phenomena as the Malleus Maleficarum and the ensuing witch-hunts, is a cultural prejudice, and, as such, a concrete example of social sin. Social sin is not less sinful for being social, nor does it engage human responsibility less for its going undetected for ages. Its victims, in this case, are both women and men.

The raising of the issue of discrimination against women in the world as well as in the Church is, theologically speaking, an instance of historical revelation, and, to that extent, the work of the Holy Spirit in the world as well as in the Church. A parallel example is afforded by the nineteenth-century revelation of the immorality of slavery.
Discrimination against women has had profound consequences for the understanding and the practice of the ordained ministry. In the past, it led to the ministry developing into a clerical caste, the existence of which has been theologically rationalized, since the third century, by a mistaken appeal to the Old Testament priesthood, and by a (mostly tacit) reliance on the cultic sensibilities and structures of the late Roman Empire, the feudal society, and the monarchic state. The Rationalist perception of the male as rationally and functionally superior is not blameless either.

One of the essential features of a caste is: excessive reliance on objective powers, masking a lack of real integration of the person, and even impeding its growth in the future. Hence, the sacramental and preaching ministries, sanctioned by ordination, are often unsupported by personally undertaken “real” ministry. As a result, members of the clergy are frequently—and often only half-consciously—the prisoners of their caste.

Hence, one should be no more in favor of men’s ordinations than women’s. In other words: women as well as men could jeopardize their integrity in aspiring to the ordained ministry.

The recent process of erosion of the clerical caste must be welcomed, though without glee.

Ordained ministers who act in a caste-like fashion suffer from a social affliction, and hence, require understanding, compassion, and forgiveness. They do not know what they do. What looks like the awkward exercise of naked power is often a cloak for the experience of acute personal insufficiency.

Women who aspire to ordination in order to get where the power is suffer from the same social affliction, and hence require understanding,
compassion, and forgiveness. What looks like raw ambition is often a cloak for the experience of acute frustration.

15

In and of itself the aspiration to power or the actual exercise of it has no standing in the Church viewed as the Temple of God in the Spirit, the Body of Christ, the Servant of God in Christ Jesus. This is also true of the sacramental and preaching ministries, no matter how valid or authorized, and no matter how capably exercised.

16

Both ordained ministers and men and women aspiring to the ordained ministry must be encouraged, by hierarchy and faithful alike, to venture into the fears, doubts, and crudities of “real” ministry, so that they may also come to experience its rewards. These rewards are first and foremost the building of the Body of Christ as sinners and sufferers come to life, but also the discovery of the actual working of divine grace as an experienced reality in the process of one’s own integration into, and reconciliation with, the Body of Christ.

17

Real ministry includes all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, whatever is excellent, whatever is worthy of praise” (Phil 8), done by apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and others (Eph 11).

18

Putting the issue in terms of the “hyphenated priest” is fatal to the discussion and leads to a separation between the sacramental and the real ministries. Both mental health and an Incarnation-inspired theology demand that the issue be put in terms of the “integrated priest.” Hence, encouraging women to engage in real ministry with the intention of keeping them out of the ordained ministry, and encouraging men to engage in sacramental ministry while making it difficult for
them to engage in real ministry both offend against the reality of the Incarnation. Ordained ministry, therefore, is not fully Christian if it is not supported by real ministry.

19

Many Christians are not ready for real ministry extended to them by women. Some of them are not even ready for real ministry extended to them by men. The only way they will be delivered from this debilitating prejudice is by experiencing real ministry. The latter will have to reckon with the probability of rejection. The real minister who is rejected—if he or she does not turn self-righteous—is in excellent company.

20

Many Christians are ready for real ministry by both men and women, and hence, they are largely ready for the ordained ministry by both women and men. This does not mean that men do not need support for real ministry, nor does it mean that women do not need support for ordained ministry.

21

It is part of the mission of the authorities in the Church to do the supporting, especially if the ministers meet with rejection.

22

The issue of women’s Orders, if set in the context of agape, should not become an ideology, especially when viewed against the background of the Church’s badly needed agapeic concern with war and hunger in the world, with national and international injustice, etc. Yet, no issue becomes unimportant because there are more important issues. The Father also cares for the flowers and the sparrows (and the whales).

23

In the Roman Catholic Church it is psychologically hard to imagine that the admission of women to Holy Orders could be accomplished without compulsory celibacy becoming optional celibacy.
Notes

Discussion points at numerous clergy meetings in the northeastern United States, both Anglican-Episcopalian and Roman Catholic, in the 1970s, originally privately printed and distributed as “Some Theses in Connection with the Ordination of Women” by The Propers, Kansas City, Missouri. Published in German as “Thesen zur Ordination von Frauen,” Orientierung 39 (1975): 153-55. Slightly rephrased in places.
So Archbishop Raymond Burke of Saint Louis threw down the gauntlet to the Catholic politicians who have voted pro-choice in his former jurisdiction of Lacrosse, Wisconsin, where he also ordered his clergy to refuse Communion to them. For me, a bishop denying sacraments to Catholics was not a first. In February 1942, in the Dutch City of the Hague, I watched a Catholic gentleman, a pious daily communicant, being refused Holy Communion in a noisy scuffle at the communion rail. I was an eleven-year-old sixth grader, an altar boy in awe at the liturgy, and determined to be a priest.

The Sunday before, I was serving at the 7:00 A.M. mass, when our pastor, a short, feisty man, surprised us. He emerged from the sacristy, mounted the pulpit after the Gospel, and vigorously read to the congregation a pastoral letter from the Dutch bishops. In it, any Catholic directly or indirectly involved in checking the public registries anywhere in the Netherlands for names of ethnically Jewish citizens was excommunicated. The pastor repeated his performance at the other four liturgies; I was there. Later on I heard he did not want to get his associates arrested by the authorities.

One result of the bishops’ letter was revenge. Within weeks, the SS were rounding up all Jews who were Catholic converts or somehow associated with Catholics; being Protestant or having Protestant associations became a lifesaver for some Jews. Nine months later, toward the end of November, I found the door of my violin teacher’s apartment sealed shut; his common-law wife was a Catholic. He was killed in Auschwitz in early December. Three months before, a Carmelite nun best known as Edith Stein, arrested in the Netherlands, had also been killed there. Five years before, in 1938, she had fled Germany in the dead of night. Five years ago, in 1998, she was canonized as Saint Benedicta of the Cross.
No sooner had I learned about Archbishop Burke’s measure in regard to Catholic politicians voting pro-choice on abortion and euthanasia than I recalled the Dutch bishops’ letter. I also found the archbishop’s measure out of proportion. On reflection, I found my reaction reasonable enough to put it in writing. This essay is the result.

A warning to the reader. This is a complex essay, but it has a dominant thesis: since *Humanae vitae* the Catholic bishops have suffered a painful loss of pastoral and magisterial authority among both laity and clergy on matters pertaining to marriage and human life, a loss decisively worsened by the recent crisis. To Catholic theologians this must raise the question to what extent this places the unity of the Catholic Church in the United States in jeopardy. Under the circumstances, I argue, it is imprudent for bishops to push the envelope by threatening Catholic politicians voting pro-choice with refusal of Holy Communion. For, arguably, the canonical grounds on which such a threat is based would not hold up even if the the bishops’ pastoral authority were enjoying full acceptance. That is to say, here and now it is by no means evident that the bishops have a positive pastoral duty to utter this particular threat.

A Catholic theologian’s pursuit of what Aquinas calls “sacred doctrine” involves responsibilities and privileges. The latter are wonderful but few in number; they do not include the right to call into question a bishop’s authority or his motives. The former may involve questioning his pastoral-theological discernment in making particular decisions. Accordingly, my argument with Archbishop Burke’s action is based on theological sources: the Catholic Tradition since at least the Middle Ages, and more recently, the Catholic way of doing things here in the United States. As Bernard Lonergan used to say, “It’s not a short story.” Not till the last third of this piece will I come to conclusions.

Let me start with some non-theological remarks. Firstly, I am not stating “my opinion”; in fact, I admit to being allergic to theologians’ opinions. I have always agreed with Lonergan’s caustic saying: “Good ideas are a dime a dozen.”
I have greatly benefited from first amendment freedom of opinion in the U.S.A. Unlike the freedom of opinion in the Northern half of the Low Countries (where tolerance is a matter of régime rather than enjoyment), American freedom of opinion is key to free thought. Much as opinions enshrine neither truth nor sound judgment, an opinionate climate is intellectually stimulating; it encourages thought by inviting tough questioning. I find myself thankful for the many years I have lived and learned (and taught) in this Republic, which has constitutionally relied on Almighty God, has not opposed religion as a matter of principle, yet has refused to consider the support of particular religious establishments the duty of its elected government. What gives me pause these days is the North American habit of reveling in opinions to the point of pushing them as guiding truths, regardless of what “we the people” express democratically. Have habits of fighting two dangerous ideology-driven political establishments rubbed off? Are we now fighting the world?

* * * * *

But now for the matter in hand. In Archbishop Burke’s judgment, “the port of entry for the culture of death in our society has been the abandonment of the respect for the procreative meaning of the conjugal act.” I could not agree more. Still, let me add something. Before the appearance of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968), North-America’s public culture had long been moving toward enjoyment of sexual experience *per se*. It did so chiefly on social-psychological and developmental-psychological grounds, favored by the hidden persuaders of Madison Avenue and the media, and thus, lacking in humane depth. Accordingly, our public culture now accepts, commends, and indeed encourages sexual experience quite apart from any consequences for life, except (and it hurts to write this) for the life of those enjoying their allegedly “private” lives as they please.

I have more to confess. Ever since *Humanae vitae* (which I have never gotten myself to oppose) I have been listening to Catholic couples, both mature and less mature. It led to reflection, and more recently, to study and writing to develop my theological understanding of the encyclical. I regret to have taken this long, but then again, it took me thirty-two years to make up my theological mind on that most delicate of theological mysteries, the Virgin Birth. Such is the life of
learning: the body travels on horseback, the mind arrives on foot. The joining of catholic faith and intellectual integrity takes time; it is never self-assured. And patience and perseverance are not so much the result of effort as gifts found in one’s knapsack at daybreak—a major theme not just in Luke’s Gospel but also in Augustine’s last writings. He wrote a treatise on it two years before he died: On the Gift of Perseverance.

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Now let me, as promised, take up the longer Catholic Tradition. In its light, the single most important teaching of Humanae vitae is this: contraception is not a matter of convenience, but a fully human—i.e., moral—issue. In this regard it differs in kind from our choice of, say, medicine, furniture, or toothpaste. Paul VI gives us a coherent as well as traditional argument for this teaching. Contraception is a moral issue.

But here I also recall a classroom incident in my second semester at Boston College, in 1969. A sophomore, whose face and name I recall, told me in class that it was the teaching of the Catholic Church that people should go to confession before receiving Communion. When I explained to him that this was in fact mistaken, he bristled and took offense. It took me a moment to realize that he was resisting discussion. But in due course I did discover how widely it was assumed that an unmarried man was bound to have committed mortal sin, mostly of the sexual kind. Now every Catholic knew that genital gratification outside the context of marriage was mortal sin, period. Aquinas had taught it in his day, when it was pretty much agreed that important people, from the emperor (and the pope?) on down, were apt to have begotten bastard children, whom they felt obliged in conscience to provide for, as a matter of “honor.” But I also found that Aquinas, in his original writings, never specifies sinful acts within marriage. And in the Oriental Tradition, sexual sins of married couples are never mentioned—as several Eastern prelates and theologians, both Orthodox and Catholic, have told me over the years. “Our moral theology stops at the door of the sanctuary which is the marriage-bed,” one said.

By the early seventeenth century a more subtle question had arisen, possibly from habits of dalliance among younger folks in the growing upper middle class. Between unmarried partners, how sinful is playful intimacy that stops short of intercourse and orgasm? Let me make a
long story short. It started with a duty imposed on Jesuit teachers. They were obliged to teach that sexual play between unmarried erotic partners could never be, in and of itself, “a small matter.” Put differently, intentional extramarital genital gratification was mortal sin as a matter of principle. Let us phrase this in technical terms. The rule for Catholic teachers was: genital activity outside marriage deliberately pursued (luxuria procurata) does not recognize small matter (parvitas materiae). By contrast, in the area of theft, “small matter” was possible: stealing a dime is venial sin by reason of the quantity of the object; no such plea could be entered in the case of “fornication”; outside the setting of marriage genital activity must be regarded as in and of itself mortal. By 1647, this teaching was tightened to include sexual activity engaged in by unmarried persons not actively pursuing sex, but only acquiescing to it. This teaching, ratified by several Roman pontiffs, is still in force. An expert writes in his class notes distributed at the Gregorian University in Rome that “from at least the beginning of the eighteenth century it has been commonly taught by manuals and in seminaries that ‘outside marriage . . . intentional sexual gratification, even if incomplete, is mortal sin.’ ”

Accordingly, the sole ground on which in particular cases such pleasures could be taken to be venial sin was lack of due consciousness or freedom. Priests knew this well. In actual practice, sins against the sixth commandment are rarely black-and-white, and in the confessional, the typical unmarried youngsters’ dilemmas were also heard in the whispers of married women unable to resist their husbands.

In any case, it is fair to say that among North American Catholics (but not just among them), especially in immigrant communities influenced by Jansenism and Puritanism, all sexual activity was implicitly considered morally delinquent, except, conceivably, in the dark context of marriage. A total of five passages in Augustine were quoted regularly, out of context of course, to the effect that there was no such thing as intercourse without at least venial sin. But this was a departure from Catholic tradition; my bristling sophomore was only one out of countless scrupulous American Catholics anxious about sex. I had encountered this frenzied phenomenon in my own country, of course, but not to such an excessive pitch. Unsurprisingly, Vatican II felt it had to insist on the high human (i.e., moral) value of faithful sexual intimacy and love. Accordingly, in Pope John Paul II’s discourses and writings on
marriage, faithful sexual intimacy and love is the dominant philosophical and theological theme. (The media have kept insisting that the ban on contraception is; they won’t have it any other way.)

After study and reflection, I came to this conclusion: \textit{Humanae vitae} teaches that every act of sexual intimacy must be open to life, quite apart from the physiological issue whether life is likely to result or not. One way to put it is this: between committed partners, there is always more the matter than animal instinct. Hence, contraception cannot be commended as “a positively good and human thing to do.” At the same time, the encyclical stops short of teaching that every act of sexual intimacy blemished by contraception is mortal sin. Several bishops’ conferences saw this almost immediately. In an act of both collegiality with Pope Paul and pastoral guidance toward the married, they accepted the teaching of \textit{Humanae vitae}, and referred the married not only to Confession and the Eucharist, but also to their consciences—a common Catholic way of suggesting that there is room for “small matter” in the practice of sexual intimacy of married people. Obviously, none of those bishops’ conferences wrote that contraception within marriage is “only” venial sin, as if it were all right to disappoint the Spirit of Love in small ways, furtively.

But here we must also remember the history of the contraception issue in the Catholic Church. After the acceptance of artificial birth control by the Anglican Communion, Pius XI made it clear in \textit{Divini illius} (1928) and \textit{Casti Connubii} (1930) that sexual liberation was abhorrent. But in the second half of Pius XII’s pontificate Catholics began to distinguish between the morality of genital activity and the morality of contraception. Unfortunately, one issue fell between the cracks: the gravity of sins against the sixth commandment within marriage. Pope Paul VI decided (prudently, I now think) to reserve that issue to himself, and at once set up a committee to advise him. The eventual result, intensely disappointing at the time, was \textit{Humanae vitae}. In my judgment, this is precisely where the United States bishops overlooked an opportunity to show care for the laity.

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Now let us focus on my second source: the Catholic way of living here in the United States. In my judgment, what occurred in the
United States was this: the bishops treated contraception not as a pastoral-theological issue (which it was), but as a doctrinal one. Several causes suggest themselves to account for this mistake. For one, American-style liberal Protestantism, especially of the Puritan, individualist kind, has long viewed the Catholic distinction between venial and mortal sin as a “typical instance of Roman hypocrisy”; after all, “true Christians don’t settle for mediocrity.” (Note: Flannery O’Connor lived to return the compliment: “Unfortunately,” she wrote, “the word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anybody with a golden heart.”) Also, some bishops may have been immobilized by the old phantom of “Americanism,” others by the fear of appearing less than entirely loyal to the Holy Father, others again by the simplified understanding, in many quarters, of contraception as an exclusively papal up-or-down issue. Habits of confusing the Catholic Church’s ethos with that of the Armed Forces may have played a role; so may the analogy between episcopacy and the task of a CEO—after all, most dioceses are incorporated this way. On the other hand, could it be that some bishops gave in to the very American, very un-Catholic temptation to equate religious faith with “being moral and doing the right thing”? Who knows?

In any case, in the teeth of both loyalty to “Rome” and North American civil religiosity and its righteousness, the wisdom of the Great Tradition is theological, not categorical; it makes room for God and God’s Mystery. This makes it subtle and merciful. Hence, almost nothing in the area of faithful intimacy is black and white. Is Christian marriage not a school of love? What students arrive fully formed? So I am suggesting that in focusing on doctrine thirty-five years ago, the United States bishops lost a key pastoral opportunity in behalf of the married laity in the Church. Rather than teaching the married about the opportunities for growth in love detailed in *Humanae vitae*, the bishops left them to their own devices (so to speak). The sad result of this was that the only Catholics who got to bear the brunt of the Church’s public, canonical rejection of contraception were the “dissenters”—at least those of them who were within the reach of canon law. Most of them were priests—celibates! Ever since, the media world—that unsubtle patron of freedom without responsibility—has been taunting Catholics with what it can only regard (and make merry over) as widespread lay and clerical insubordination to papal and episcopal authority.
Time for a quick sidestep. I hate to point out the structural analogy between the aftermath of *Humanae vitae* and the recent crisis. Still, it is hard to miss. The bishops again fell short of their pastoral responsibility to the married laity, only this time by omission. They appear to have done so under the probable “leadership” of a handful of influential but pastorally and theologically inept figures, even to the point where some of the latter had become criminally complicit with a small minority of pathological priests. This ended up further eroding the credibility of the bishops’ pastoral authority in sexual matters, and driving quite a few priests, accused of having permitted themselves sinful (but non-criminal) liberties in the past, into serious ecclesiastical punishments forced on the bishops by an unforgiving blackmailer—the media, quite possibly aided by lawyers taking advantage of them and opening the courtroom to mere grudges.

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So where do I stand? Like all of us, I am a sinner, happy to be a servant of Jesus Christ in a Catholic Church full of fellow-sinners. I am a priest-theologian, but without worshiping the Church; indeed, I suffer with it, as family members will with family. Blaming is as old as the Garden of Eden; the Living Christian Tradition opposes it. My only authority is familiarity with this Tradition; I rarely show my hand on matters of current interest. Still, Archbishop Burke’s stand, politically brave as it may be, raises so many doubts about the fit between North American Catholicity and the Great Tradition that I have resolved to do a bit of theology in public. I have concluded that withholding the sacraments to Catholic politicians in the present situation is too severe a penalty. First, it is out of touch with the practice of Christian mercy vis-à-vis a wayward world wounded and steeped in sin, but not degenerate down to the root. Second, it comes perilously close to selective blaming. (Ignatius Loyola is said to have called a Jesuit priest on the carpet for criticizing the current pope’s sins from the pulpit; he told him that we do not publicly discuss the sins of individuals.) Third, human life is not the ultimate value—a point to which I will come back. But savage as abortion-on-demand is, it has an up-side, like everything sinful; so, some fifteen years after *Roe v. Wade* I found myself suggesting to students that the knowledge that they were wanted at
birth was a grace; and three years ago, in my hearing, a young religious volunteered that a physician had “cautioned” his mother while she was pregnant. Talk about thankfulness for the given gift of life!

As for euthanasia, have we Catholics not witnessed repeated episodes in which the medical and judicial establishments have colluded in order to prevent mostly older people suffering from terminal illness from dying in peace? Have they not also colluded in order to demand experimental surgery on babies with inoperable birth-defects? Here we go again, the very old and the very young must pay the piper at the contemporary dance of death!

So whenever we find ourselves saying, vehemently or piously, “No matter what, we should at least be doing something,” we are making a theological mistake. For in the last resort we Catholics should let on, unobtrusively, that all human life is in God’s hand, notably at the origin and at the end, as Gregory of Nyssa pointed out almost seventeen centuries ago, and not long after him, Augustine.

Finally, a minor point. Archbishop Burke would seem to overlook the sound canonical practice of restrictive application of laws imposing penalties and limiting freedoms, as well as the sound moral practice of distinguishing between formal and merely material cooperation. Being resigned to the world’s evil is not the same as approving of it, let alone promoting it; even logically, pro-choice is not the same as pro-abortion; neither cowardice nor dodging is evidence of positive malice, and so, not mortally sinful. Ignorant as I may be, I know of no Catholic politicians who have advisedly elected to advance abortion on demand or euthanasia; most of them are like Catholic judges handing down uncontested divorce decrees; they may “personally”—a bad choice of words—not approve of it, but (for better for worse) it is the law of the land.

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I need not explain that the ready availability of abortion is a horror as well as a tragic miscarriage of the American system of just government. Bypassing any careful, patient, fair political process, it made its sudden entry by the judicial arrogance of a majority on the Supreme Court inspired (frightened?) by ideologies whose popular support was
far from majoritarian. But there is more. The general advertizing of contraceptives as the “solution” to a human “problem” strikes me as a malign intrusion into the human mystery of faithful affection. The blind distribution of free contraceptives to high-school students is, to borrow the late Cardinal Hume’s words, “a counsel of despair.” Accordingly, we Catholic Christians must now learn how to testify to our God and to our faith in God, but not by blaming the sower and rooting up the tares. In matters of life and death, we should keep the upper hand—hold the Sword of the Word by the handle, not the cutting edge, lest we ourselves come under its edge. No evil in our world is final, not even the “contraceptive mentality” so firmly identified as gravely (i.e., mortally) wrong by John Paul II. Our public culture is savage because its only goal seems to be pleasure without pregnancy; death-by-abortion now seems to be an acceptable tool to favor existing life over any future vexation; “mercy-killing” has become an alternative to tender loving care—a victory for those who seem to hold that all pain should be fought or simply removed. In this North-American world, it is now difficult to be a Catholic. But the Catholic Catechism explains that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the worst injustice ever, and that from it our omnipotent and merciful God has drawn the greatest good.

Poor Catholic politicians. They’re no heroes, but they are not censurable. They are sinners, but implausible candidates for canonical penalties; and equivalently calling their sin mortal is not a priestly ministry. Our “dissenters” (incidentally, not a Catholic term) are miles removed from the Donatists, who treated ordinary Catholics as schismatics. Yet Augustine insisted on calling them brothers, and taught his congregation to do the same. He did not refuse dialogue; he looked for it. As an old man, he did grow harder and harder on the Pelagians; but they equivalently proposed that faith was at least partly a human accomplishment, and hence, substantially a moral duty. The senior bishops who publicly opposed Cardinal Bernardin’s Common Ground Initiative were way out of touch with the Great Tradition. What they said did not sound like the Word of God.

In 1957, a tall, athletic, slightly mischievous Dutch Jesuit priest who is now eighty-nine and still pastorally active, asked a twenty-seven-year-old scholastic too intense for his own (and others’) good: “Can I
tell you something?” He replied, hesitantly, “Yes.” He smiled and said: “Don’t be so pushy with the kids; remember, God never pushes, He only pulls.” One of those teachable moments: God’s people are not to be pushed about.

Notes

A piece written for *Commonweal*, 131, no. 11 (June 4, 2004): 19-21. About half of it made it into print.