

Tomorrow: Holy Hour
at 4:45 in Sacred Heart
Church. Drop in.

University of Notre Dame
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Friday: Novena to the
Sorrowful Mother resumes
at 6:45.

Who Speaks For The Church ?

Who is entitled to speak in the name of the Catholic Church; and whose word are we to trust as the expression of her mind ? The question comes to mind frequently, especially when some disputed point -- for example, in labor legislation -- is upheld, or condemned, by various Catholic clergy and laity.

The Catholic Church, it must always be remembered, asserts her infallibility in matters of faith and morals. This infallibility resides in the office of the Sovereign Pontiff as Vicar of Christ on earth. It resides also in the Apostolic College as represented by the bishops of the Church, teaching in unison with the Bishop of Rome. When the Holy Father, by himself, or in concert with the bishops of the world, deems it necessary or useful, he speaks ex cathedra, and the question is settled once for all

More commonly, without invoking his supernatural prerogative of infallibility, the Holy Father speaks to the faithful simply as the divinely appointed guardian of faith and human behavior. In this pattern he is followed by the bishops of the world who address the flocks committed to their care in like manner. On the parish level, the teaching of the Church is transmitted through the pastoral office. So long as these pronouncements are confined to their proper spheres, it is the duty of Catholics to give them their unqualified adherence.

It so happens that the sphere of morals is less well defined than the sphere of faith. And in the wake of the industrial revolution, the Church has given her closest attention to the vexed questions which have arisen in labor-management relations, attempting to define what is basic and minimal for the preservation of human rights and human dignity. But she cannot reasonably be expected to pronounce on every item of legislation throughout the free world. Especially is this true in areas where debate is still justified. All such issues are by no means solidly black and white. It is not always clear whether they are injurious to human rights or are actually beneficial. In such areas she prudently prefers to abide the clarification of the points under debate. In other words, the Church is not a sort of universal "umpire" ready at all times to jump into every discussion with a cut-and-dried answer. Some theologians and bishops may feel that the issues are sufficiently clear to warrant their pronouncement upon them. The Church does not forbid this. Indeed, she is far more liberal in this regard than most of the professed "liberals" themselves. Her common sense, and her long experience of human events have taught her that trial and error are the best solvents of many problems where rights and wrongs are not absolutely defined. All she asks is that it be made clear that she has not officially spoken to end the matter.

The difficulty is that some theologians and Catholic publicists are prone to write and speak as though they were the Holy Father himself. Instead of stating the facts and drawing their conclusions with emphasis upon the actual limitations of their authority, they sometimes create the impression that they have a private pipeline to infallibility. It is not the Church that is at fault in these instances, but rather the over-zealous and over-opinionated among her children. Yet, it is a tribute to her basic tolerance that she prefers to encounter this risk rather than stifle intelligent discussion.

But great care should always be taken in the case of quotations from individual priests or theologians to make sure they have been fully and correctly represented. More than one man has been damned -- especially in heated and violent political debate -- on the strength of a sentence taken out of its setting or context.

PRAYERS - Deceased: Joseph F. Donahue, '13 (Trustee); Judge John Q. Carey, '27; father of John F. McCullough of Dillon; mother of Mrs. T. Cummings; friend of Steve Barry of Morrissey; Dr. John F. Shaner; mother of Joseph Zwiers, '37.