



NEWS

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CATHOLIC-PRESBYTERIAN CONSULTATION HAS STATEMENTS ON ABORTION, HUMAN RIGHTS

WASHINGTON--Participants in an official Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed dialogue have issued statements on two topics pertaining to ethics and the search for Christian unity--one on abortion, the other on human rights--that spell out points of agreement as well as divergence between the two traditions.

The statements were produced by participants in the third round of discussions by the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed Consultation jointly sponsored by the U.S. Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational). Dialogue between the two traditions has been going on uninterruptedly since 1965. Previous discussions and joint statements have been devoted to subjects such as "ministry" and "sacraments."

The most recent discussions, on the theme of "Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity," were held twice a year beginning in 1976 at Princeton Theological Seminary and alternately at the Sisters of St. Francis Retreat Center in Washington, D.C.

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Also made public, in addition to the statements on abortion and on human rights, were several other documents: a Roman Catholic and Reformed commentary on each statement, clarifying the respective stances of the two traditions, and an interpretive report on the theological, philosophical and historical background of the discussions in general as well as on the specific themes of the present round.

In a preface to the report, the two co-chairmen, Dr. Andrew Harsanyi, *Eastern Classes Dean of Hungarian Reformed Church in America,* ~~professor of theology at Princeton,~~ and Roman Catholic Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler of Charleston, South Carolina, said the Consultation chose the specific areas of abortion and human rights "to show how ethical decisions are being made in the two traditions; not only on the top level but also in regional context and individually as Christians."

The approach to these themes was "to treat both problems from the viewpoint of the Christian ecumenist, showing with clarity when there is agreement between the two traditions and with charity where there is disagreement; also, in the sincere conviction that diversity and unity are not mutually exclusive."

"The Consultation was not a series of bargaining sessions meant to reach a compromise," the co-chairmen said. "The members of the Consultation are well aware of the painful differences that exist between the two traditions...and, consequently, in the practice of the Churches and of individual Christians of the two traditions dealing with these problems. At the

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same time, having clarified the underlying reasons for the differences, they better appreciated the many points of agreement. This may well show the way to some forceful joint actions."

The statement on abortion said the Consultation was able to reach agreement on the following basic principles:

- the transcendent basis for respect for human life is the image and likeness of God in which human beings are created.

- the ultimate responsibility for moral decision making rests with the individual conscience guided by reason and grace.

- authentic moral decisions can never be exclusively subjective or individualistic but must take account of the insights and concerns of the broader religious, social and familial community.

- judicial and legislative standards are not always coterminous with moral demands, and therefore the legalization of abortion does not of itself absolve the Christian conscience from moral responsibility.

- religious groups have the right to use licit means to influence civil policy regarding abortion.

Some of the areas in which substantial differences were discovered, according to the statement, included the following:

- the moment and meaning of personhood.

- the rights of the unborn in situations where rights are in conflict.

- the role of civil law in matters pertaining to abortion.

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--the interrelation of individual versus communal factors in decision making.

"We will always respect the personal dignity of those involved in making decisions about abortion," the statement said. "Regardless of the ultimate decision reached, we will offer pastoral support insofar as our personal conscience and moral convictions allow," it continued. "We will take responsibility as part of the mission of the Church to create an ethos which values all life and which works toward a society where abortion need not occur."

The Roman Catholic commentary on the abortion statement noted that both sides of the Consultation agreed that education is one of the principal areas where the Churches could make a substantial contribution to the creation of that society. "Though there is general agreement on many aspects of the education program that is needed, there do exist substantial areas of disagreement," the commentary said. "Presbyterian/Reformed members see artificial birth control as an important preventive of abortion and question the wisdom of Catholic opposition to artificial contraception. Catholics on their part regard artificial contraception as contrary to the moral order and often a factor contributing to the breakdown of moral values and promiscuity that only increases the incidence of abortion."

Similarly, the commentary observed that both sides agree provision must be made for supportive services to assist those

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dealing with the question of a problem pregnancy. "The purpose and nature of these services in a Catholic context are intended to be supportive of a decision to carry the pregnancy to term and would include counseling, financial and welfare assistance, medical help, homes for single mother and adoption agencies," it said. "In the Presbyterian/Reformed context the necessary services that society ought to provide would include, in addition to the above, services that could support a personal decision to terminate a pregnancy."

The statement on human rights said civil governments must allow familial, cultural, scientific and religious groups freedom in organization, belief and practice. "No state may prevent these parts of society and its peoples from working politically toward reform of government when that government fails to live up to the universal moral law or overtly subverts it. When a regime becomes the aggressor against its own members, and when other means of reform are closed, revolution may be a necessity to reconstitute a society under moral law," the statement said.

The statement cited South Africa as one example of "a troubled area deeply influenced by branches of the Christian religion, yet one where many features of human rights are violated. The failure to apply human rights to economic and racial questions is dramatic," the statement said. "Moreover, in South Africa, the regime is sustained by a distorted form of imperial Calvinist doctrine that operates as a legitimizer of tyranny, much as a misguided form of authoritarian Catholicism

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has done in other ages and in other parts of the world. Fuller understanding of the theological foundations of human rights, and a fuller obedience to God's will, can serve to correct these distortions.

"Under other social and historical conditions, liberation from the particular pathologies that reign will take many forms, and the resolution of conflicting rights may vary in view of specific contexts; but all forms of struggle for liberation, and all specific resolutions of conflicting rights, we jointly affirm, must be in those directions which keep alive the prospect of fulfilling basic and universal human rights in all areas of human existence and society."

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