

# Comment

## *Magisterial pronouncements*

W.G. Ward, the ultramontanist, would have been happy to have learned a new infallible truth every morning at the breakfast table, but Church documents were rather different in his day from what they are in ours.

In the span of five months four major documents have emerged from Rome—an output unequalled since the post-conciliar time. Admittedly, the most recent one, the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, published on 25 March, is basically a prelude to the Marian Year starting at Pentecost, and should not precipitate a lot of uneasy reflection. Not a lot. But this cannot be said of the others: the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's letter to the bishops on the pastoral care of homosexuals, out at the end of October; the Justice and Peace Commission's document on international debt, out at the end of January; and the CDF's document on bioethics, out on 10 March.

We are not going to repeat here the old grumbles about the Vatican's one-way conception of communication and the ecclesiology behind it, and about the inadequacies of Roman scholasticism; you have heard those grumbles quite often enough. And the first and third of these documents have already had plenty of press coverage. What, then, have we got to say?

The three documents are making an attack on a widely shared assumption of the consumer society—that what we do with our bodies and our wealth and our scientific knowledge is our own business. 'By defending man against the excesses of his own power, the Church of God reminds him of the reasons for his true nobility,' to quote the bioethics document. No Catholics can in conscience object to that, even if they do not like the paternalistic way it is put.

No, what troubles us, reading these three documents, is our world's massive complexity. In these documents the Vatican passes fairly specific judgments (which it hopes will have political consequences) on some extremely involved and to some extent novel issues. Do the people in the Vatican properly understand the issues they are making judgments on? And, even if they do, when the issues are as involved and novel and far-reaching as these, can any judgments, even sound ones, that come from 'outside the situation'—that are not, in other words, the outcome of discussion involving the people concerned—have much impact on non-clerical opinion? This is not a plea for democracy in the Church, though plenty more of that is needed, but for a Church that will get itself more seriously heard.

The first document, the one on homosexuals, has stirred up the most controversy and is the weakest. The article in this number on the organization Dignity may help you to understand why it came to be drafted. Let us skip the metaphysical problems the document raises. More to the point here is the remark in the careful commentary on it published by the sober (indeed, dour) British Catholic organization for homosexuals called Quest: 'Officials of the Congregation need to look long and closely at homosexual people. It is not enough to apply oneself assiduously to what the human sciences have to tell them... There is a, perhaps, greater need: to meet and live with a wide range of homosexual people.'

Very different is the next document, the one on international debt, which boldly says that third-world debtor countries are not always morally obliged to repay their first-world creditors. The appalling burden of third-world debt—now around \$1 trillion and driving the world's poor ever deeper into poverty—is one of the giant scandals of our time, and what this document says is fundamentally right. Yet some high-minded economists (they do still exist) are uneasy. They feel a document like this needs to be launched in such a way that it does not get misused or misread; it cannot be safely tossed at the world from on high. Haphazard defaulting could even lead to an international financial crisis ... and three weeks after the document's release Brazil, now the second largest debtor nation, announced that it was unilaterally suspending its interest payments.

The third document, on bioethics, is on what—at least in the long term—is likely to be the most important and complex issue of all. Once again, the basic point the Vatican is out to make is surely right. But, once again, the working out of this is less happy. Some devout and devoted couples whose only hope of having children is by *in vitro* fertilisation are utterly bewildered by the Church's insistence on isolating 'the conjugal act' from the totality of a loving relationship; they cannot reconcile this way of thinking with their experience.

The Church cannot pronounce judgments on questions like these at a distance and get the results it wants. Why must it insist that what it says even on issues that baffle everybody should be final? What stops it, when it confronts worldly matters, from imitating the rulers of this world and sometimes issuing exploratory 'Green Papers'? As the appalling AIDS debate has surely shown, until Christians are prepared to become deeply engaged with the great issues of the day they wish to speak about, it is safer for everybody if they are reticent.

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