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Fr. Carl Pfeiffer, S.J. -

Heretics And Buffoons Meet In Washington

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

(PART III)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The annual Religious Education Institute of the Archdiocese of Washington, held this year on February 24th, was a spiritual-intellectual disaster of the sorriest sort. In previous parts of this report, we have looked at the vulgar and hideous "liturgies" that were "celebrated" there and at the remarks of the featured speaker, Fr. Raymond Brown, S.S., a considerably over-rated New Testament scholar. In this final installment, we look in on one of the afternoon workshops, specifically, the one called "Celebrating Change Within Continuity."

The workshop speaker was Fr. Carl Pfeiffer, S.J., who holds a high post in the USCC bureaucracy. In fact, he is the Assistant National Director of CCD. He got his education at Catholic University, Georgetown, Laval and Innsbruck; he has co-authored a series called *Life, Love and Joy*, and he now teaches religious education at CU and is a contributor to *NC News'* "Know Your Faith" series. In other words, Fr. Pfeiffer has credentials. When he speaks on a key topic, such as doctrinal change, we can be certain that we are not hearing some low-brow distortion but a faithful and competent presentation of

what top-flight theorists of Catholic education maintain today. We can also be certain that we are hearing something widely accepted and not just some notion which Fr. Pfeiffer is eccentric in holding.

THE MASTER THEOLOGY FOR DOCTRINAL DISASTER

The subject of cultural change or, more specifically, the impact of cultural change on Catholic life is absolutely crucial today. The disconcerting mess which has been forced upon everyone save the luckiest few in liturgical matters (I

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don't mean the change in *Ordo* but the change of "atmosphere," the disappearance of solemnity and reverence in our churches) is justified, we are told, by the new cultural circumstances within which worship must take place today. The revolution in catechetics is defended on the basis that there are now vast social changes going on, to which the child's growing faith must be made "relevant." We are told that the classical statements of our Faith, especially the documents of Chalcedon, Trent and Vatican I, are pastorally useless today because of these mysterious and powerful socio-cultural changes, with the result that our doctrine must be "reformulated." Traditional moral norms, especially those relating to politics and to sexual self-control, are said to be in need of serious overhaul today, again because of the allegedly profound changes which

have taken place in human society and even in man himself. Changes in canon law, changes in the lifestyle of the priesthood, changes in the garb and self-image of the nuns, changes in the very nature of religion, in man's fundamental stance towards God — all these are said to be created or necessitated by these all-important socio-cultural changes. It is to this crucial issue of cultural and doctrinal change that Fr. Pfeiffer dedicated his talk; and in the opinion of this reporter, Pfeiffer's remarks were so disastrously wrong and yet so thoroughly enlightening, that a brief workshop attended by just a handful of people on that uneventful Saturday afternoon in February deserves to be made an issue for *The Wanderer's* national audience. For this was no routine, dime-a-dozen horror story of the priest-talks-through-his-hat variety but a disclosure, I believe, of what could almost be called the master theology behind everything that

has been going wrong for the last ten years.

What follows is an unabridged transcript of my notes from Fr. Pfeiffer's lecture.

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(Pfeiffer said) I want to give you a model for understanding change in the Church, one that is not just theoretical but also pedagogically useful.

People are ignorant about the development of doctrine. But the nature of this development is what requires us to strike a balance: we cannot go back to the *Baltimore Catechism*, but neither can we go forward by scrapping everything.

We start with faith. This is an experience. "I believe in God" expresses an experience. But this experience also gives rise to questions. The efforts at answering these questions, at articulating our faith, leads to faith as interpretation. Going from experience to interpretation is something we all do. Irish women

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are especially good at it (that is, at interpreting everyday experiences as the will of God, etc.). Experts make this interpretation professionally (e.g., Rahner, Schillebeeckx). Then the hierarchy has its role. We call this process "faith seeking understanding." It can also be called theology. But when everybody (faithful, experts, hierarchy) gets together and says, "Right now, this is what our faith means," then you have doctrine. Doctrine is interpretation agreed upon by the community.

Our experience of God today is conditioned by our culture. We are Americans and experience differently from Africans and Asians. Hence, we also interpret differently. Among the things that condition our experience are: environment (suburbs, inner city, etc.), socio-economic conditions, politics, science, art. Thus our interpretation is influenced by language, thought-categories (e.g., evolution), media, technology, etc.

Therefore: any question about faith is limited (by culture), and hence any interpretation is limited. There can be other interpretations and further interpretations. Thus there must be pluralism and also development in doctrine because we change. This means that faith in the United States may be different from faith in China. People are disturbed because there is no longer uniformity in the Church.

Let's test this model with one thread of doctrine — the doctrine of Jesus.

We start with the experience of the disciples. Let's call this E-1. As the disciples try to question and find the meaning of their experience of Jesus, they produce their interpretation, I-1, which is the New Testament. This is the interpretation of Jews in the first century, limited by their Semitic cultural equipment. We know the words of their answers as to who Jesus was (Messiah, Servant, Lord, Son of Man, etc.), but we can hardly guess the meaning.

When the Gospel comes to the Greek gentiles, they, conditioned by their own culture, have a different experience of Jesus, E-2. They find that the first interpretation (I-1) does not speak to them; so, reflecting on E-2 as well as on I-1, they come up with their own interpretation, I-2. This is the Greek, philosophical interpretation of Jesus. It is concerned with the questions of what is real. It involves terms like nature, person, God, hypostasis, hypostatic union — all that complicated stuff we used to talk about (laughter).

As we come on down to the present day, we have our own experience of Jesus conditioned by modern culture, E-3. (Actually, this should be thought of as E-15 or E-20.) What are the questions that we ask today? Well, we ask, "Did Jesus fall in love?" "Did he know who he was?" "Did he make mistakes?" These are not the old questions. Today theologians are asking about the consciousness of Christ. All this leads us to make an interpretation for our own time, I-3. This is based on personalism and psychology (identity crisis). We derive our categories from novels, movies; we see Christ in terms of humanism, progress, evolution (Teilhard). People say that Jesus is the key to life's mystery, that He is the ideal man, the center of progress, etc. We focus on meaning rather than being.

And the next generation will have its own experience, which will be E-4. What will this be? We don't know, but this is what we are educating people for. In order to do this, we must observe two rules: (1) we must not identify orthodoxy with one cultural expression, with terms like transubstantiation or hypostatic union — these we must avoid; (2) we must make our education a process that allows people to grow and promotes growth, helping them to see doctrine as developing and pluralistic.

So how can we grow and yet maintain continuity and hence orthodoxy? The answer lies in observing four principles:

1) The key: contact with Christ — keep going back to try to be in touch with Jesus Christ;

2) the norm of interpretation will always be the Bible; religious education must be Christocentric and Biblical;

3) the touchstone is experience; if our interpretation is irrelevant to our lives, then it is no longer the right one for us;

4) the guarantee of continuity is community; memorizing formulae will not guarantee orthodoxy; only growth in community will do this.

All of this gives us the model behind the lesson plans in my book and behind the National Catechetical Directory (?). Everything is to be a process aimed at maturing faith, aimed at life and at what is going on today. Life and tradition must be related together, a process which must involve the faithful, the experts and the hierarchy. The three things we must do are: explore, share, pray.

(The floor is now opened for questions. A Sister asks whether it isn't really valuable to teach children some formulas, so that everybody at least has a common basis. She mentions that this is what the Bishops are trying to do with their "Basic Teachings." Pfeiffer answers:) It is impossible to impose a uniformity of expression, because of the diversity of textbooks, etc. The "Basic Teachings" don't solve anything, because the books we use are not set up with the ideas of the "Basic Teachings" in mind, nor are the teaching materials. There is no way of imposing a solution from above (such an attempt would be contrary to our view of the Church today). The Bishops cannot do this because the textbooks are not under ecclesiastical control.

(A second question: Since there are so many interpretations of the Church, how do we know that we are teaching is right? Pfeiffer answers:) This is a big problem. The individual must work it out for himself according to the whole process indicated above.

End of transcript.

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TEN CONDEMNED PROPOSITIONS COUNTED

This rather lengthy exposure to Fr. Pfeiffer's remarks should have given the reader a vivid impression of *deja vu*. One need only reread *Lamentabili* and *Pascendi* to find out what is familiar about it. By my count, no less than ten propositions formally condemned in *Lamentabili* were advanced by Pfeiffer either in so many words or by strict implication (cf. *Denz-Sch.* 3406, 3420-22, 3431, 3458-60, 3462, and 3464). But another and equally important source of this familiarity lies in the fact that Pfeiffer has brought together in one place and in one reasonably coherent outline a collection of ideas which, taken separately, pullulate everywhere. To refute Pfeiffer's model at some length, therefore, is not to zero in on one hapless and undistinguished lecture; it is to sweep together a million gnats in one net. The analysis and refutation falls into three parts.

1) DISTORTIONS OF ORTHODOXY

The fundamental weakness of Pfeiffer's model lies in the hazy distinction between "experience" and "interpretation." These two

terms simply cannot do duty for the four traditional terms revelation, *fides qua*, *fides quae*, and theology. Where, pray tell, in Pfeiffer's binomial scheme, is the distinction between revelation and *fides qua*? In fact, where is revelation in Pfeiffer's scheme at all? Is it E-1? Is it, I-1? Or, as appears more likely, is revelation for Pfeiffer some on-going business which turns up in all the E's and gets interpreted in all the I's? Furthermore, where is the distinction between theology and faith (*fides quae*)? Is it legitimate to reduce both to the undifferentiated term "interpretation"? Is *fides quae* merely that portion of theology which at one time or another everybody agreed upon? Pfeiffer seems to imply as much when he defines doctrine as "the interpretation agreed upon by the community," a definition which is absolutely unacceptable theologically and nonsense historically.

CONFUSING PRESENTATION

Because of this lack of clear distinctions, Pfeiffer drags the development of dogma into places where it has no business. For example, the question of whether we can or can't go back to the Baltimore Catechism has nothing remotely to do with the question of whether our understanding of dogma does or does not develop. Nothing *de fide definita* is ever cancelled by legitimate development; hence nothing in the Baltimore Catechism would ever have to be changed or removed on this ground. Moreover, those who wrote, revised, and used this Catechism for so many decades were perfectly aware that development takes place and never saw any contradiction between that fact and their pedagogical practice. Nor was there any contradiction. It looks suspiciously as though Pfeiffer has confused development of doctrine with change in theology and then boldly labeled his own theology a "development" of doctrine! In this light there may very well be an incompatibility. It may well be that the old-fashioned catechism is discordant with Pfeiffer's theology. But that is an embarrassment for Fr. Pfeiffer, not for the Baltimore Catechism!

Needless to say, I prescind in the above from all purely pedagogical considerations.

It is not too hard to figure out what Pfeiffer has done, in a rather confused way, is to identify revelation with "experience" and doctrine with "interpretation." But this disjunction between revelation and doctrine, as though doctrine were not the very content of revelation, is something the Church has never tolerated. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II makes it perfectly clear that revelation itself consists of words (*verba*, that is, concepts and judgments) that have an inner relationship to God's acts, clarifying and explaining these acts, just as the acts in turn "manifest and confirm the realities signified by the words." Revelation, then, to use Pfeiffer's scheme, must be identified with I-1 plus the Apostolic tradition (tradition — another thing Pfeiffer never mentions!) and not with some mysterious, alien and largely incommunicable "experience" (cf. Pasceudi, Denz-Sch. 3484).

In fact, it is Pfeiffer's appeal to experience which gives away his basic error. He makes the diversity and development of dogmatic formulas rest ultimately on a diversity of subjective states, of experiences mediated by culture; but the truth of the matter is that plurality and development in dogma rest upon the sublimity of the revealed object. Throughout history the Church must wrestle with the revealed Truths, ever expanding her consciousness of Them and Their sublime interconnexion, because no one form of human words can ever capture them fully! And why not? Precisely because the revelation of Truths about God is necessarily the revelation of God Himself, in Whom there is absolutely no distinction between His Being and His Truth and equally no distinction between one Truth and another. This is what Fr. Pfeiffer seems to have forgotten, giving us instead a kind of Copernican revolution away from the Divine object and toward the human subject. Lamentable confusion! But Fr. Pfeiffer was not the first to fall into it.

II) THE INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF PFEIFFER'S MODEL

Pfeiffer's attempt to ground the development of doctrine in the subject rather than the object of revelation goes back to deeper and better sources than the modernist ideology condemned in Pasceudi. Most notably, it goes back to the celebrated German theologian, Johann Adam Moehler (1796-1836). I refer specifically to Moehler's earliest major work, *Die Einheit der Kirche oder das Prinzip des Katholizismus dargestellt im Geiste der Kirchenväter der drei ersten Jahrhunderte*, Tuebingen, 1825 (the title being in English: *Unity in the Church, or the Principle of Catholicism Expounded in the Spirit of the Fathers of the Church of the First Three Centuries*). Parenthetically, the influence of this book in our century is due to a French translation made in 1938. In the first chapter of this rich and remarkable book, Moehler explains what makes Christians one. He finds that it is not dogma as such (for this would be an intellectualist distortion of the matter, which Moehler equates with gnosticism). Nor is it mysticism, for this often leads to enthusiasm (in Knox's sense). No, what really makes Christians one is the "life" which Christ imparts. Christianity is not ultimately a teaching but a life, a love, a *Gemuete*, as Moehler repeatedly calls it, using a German word which has no English equivalent. This love-filled life which is at the center of Catholicism, Moehler insists, is primarily a matter of the heart, as opposed to the intellect. Concepts and dogmas are merely attempts to express what this sublime life entails.

Let me quote at this point what Herve Savon says about Moehler's teaching:

Let us try to grasp more precisely this passage from life to concept. In the beginning there is an inner experience which is at the same time an affective state and an immediate knowledge. Now it can be given its name: faith. This faith, Moehler explains while commenting on Clement of Alexandria, does not consist solely in maintaining the truth of an affirmation. It is a "spiritual certitude." Here again faith is presented not as the belief we give a witness, but as an aspect of self-consciousness. This form of self-consciousness evidently

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exists for each Christian only by an appropriation of the collective consciousness of the Church. . . . Moehler insists: "Christianity does not consist in words, formulas and statements; it is an inner life, a holy power."

Dogmas, therefore, have no value except to the extent that they express the inner life. Why are they necessary? The concepts they put into play are limited, and so always fail to exhaust the life, which is the inexpressible. Life as such, on the other hand, cannot be fixed and so cannot become communicable: this stabilization is what notions and formulas accomplish. They are the description of a certain state of the inner life. That is the reason for their importance. Noetus, Artemon, or Pelagius are not rejected because their formulas were different from those of the Church, but because their inner life and their spirit were different. Here we can see how Moehler practically reverses the perspective of classical theology: concepts are no longer considered to represent an objective reality, but as representing the concrete experience of the subject. Their insufficiency is no longer relative to the transcendence of the object but is due to the inexpressible character of the life they are meant to manifest . . . (Herve Savon, *Johann Adam Moehler, The Father of Modern Theology*, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1966).

The close affinity between what Pfeiffer calls "experience" and Moehler's notion of "life" and the parallel affinity of "interpretation" with Moehler's "concepts" should now be evident. Obviously, Moehler's theory has had some dangerous consequences! But it should be pointed out in fairness to the German thinker (who died, by the way, well before the modern revival of scholastic theology, from which he undoubtedly would have profited a great deal) that Moehler's theory is not nearly as simplistic as Pfeiffer's and that Moehler's romanticism, though dangerous, has several saving graces that are totally missing in Pfeiffer's cultural relativism. In fact, it could

be said that Pfeiffer distorts Moehler as much as we have already seen him distorting orthodoxy.

PFEIFFER'S POSITION IS UNTENABLE

First of all, Moehler's "life" includes conceptual thinking as one element of itself (so at least Moehler says in some passages), whereas Pfeiffer's "experience" is separate from interpretation and prior to it temporally. Of course it is true, as Moehler says, that there is more to Christianity than dogma. Dogma and worship and various other things take their place in a whole Way, or Life, that is larger than any one of them and is inexhaustibly sublime. It is also possible to speak of this "life" as prior in some way, or deeper than mere assent; it is possible to look at the elements of this "life" in abstraction from the conceptual or dogmatic part of it. In other words, Moehler arrives at his concept of "life" by abstracting but not prescinding from the conceptual element. Pfeiffer, on the other hand, both abstracts and prescinds from conceptual thought in order to arrive at his pure, foundational "experience." But in so doing Pfeiffer falls into an untenable position. For, if everything a man can formulate about his faith-experience is interpretation, it follows that the experience itself is unformulable. But in that case, there can be no interpretation of it! How can anybody interpret what he cannot formulate? Hence every interpretation, because it is logically impossible, becomes purely arbitrary.

This thought leads us to another and equally important distinction between Moehler and Pfeiffer. If anything is clear in *Die Einheit der Kirche*, it is that for Moehler the Christian's sublime life or *Gemuet* is something absolutely unique. It is one thing for Jew and Greek, or first-century Catholic and modern theologian: it is what makes all Christians spiritually alike. In this way, Moehler's *Gemuet* is not passive with respect to man and his culture but supremely active; it forms and informs all men who retain the bond of Catholic unity. This Christian spirit (*esprit de corps!*) is precisely analogous to what Fichte and other nationalist ideologues were saying about the German spirit, except that the latter was particular and the

former, according to Moehler, universal. By way of contrast, Pfeiffer's "experience" is not one thing at all. It is different in every culture and in every historical epoch. Far from grounding unity, it grounds diversity. We turn, therefore, at this point to Pfeiffer's notion of culture.

III) PFEIFFER'S NOTION OF CULTURE AND FAITH

"Culture" is one of those jelly-fish words which every man who values his intellectual clarity would do well decently to avoid. So at least T.S. Eliot concluded in the course of writing his *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture*, in which, of course, we do not get a definition of culture but more like a dozen definitions. And properly so, because in fact people use this word to mean startlingly different things. Perhaps the broadest difference is between those (classicists) who use "culture" to mean a universal norm and those (romantics, relativists) who always speak of "cultures" as though their plurality made a universal norm impossible.

It is well known that the people who live in Turin are different from the people who live in Chicago, in the sense that they live differently and react to various ideas differently. Now a healthy portion of what makes them different is simply a matter of history. Different things happened in Turin from what happened in Chicago, so that people have different memories and a different national heritage. Another good portion of what makes these people different is language: there are certain notions and certain connotations in Italian which are not easily translatable into English and vice-versa. A third position is morals: certain types of misbehavior are treated more lightly by one group than by the other. Then there is family structure: an extended and closeknit family structure produces a sharply different type of society from the American pattern of the nuclear family. Finally, we can mention education: children in Turin are taught to read Dante and to like Opera, whereas children in Chicago get Shakespeare (or is it Mickey Spillane these days?) and very little if any musical training. So, put them together: history, language, morals, family and

education. Now I ask you — if I had put “culture” in the list, what difference would it have made? What would it have signified that was not already signified by the other terms? Frankly, I don’t know; but I am certain that if I had said Italians differ from Americans in “history, language, morals, culture, family and education,” everyone, myself included, would have thought that the list made perfectly good sense and that each term in it was different in meaning and contributive to the proposition.

We have all been brainwashed, you see, by the romantics, and by the unholy trinity of Hegel-Spengler-Toynbee. Beginning about two hundred years ago, certain thinkers began to link together in their minds all the separate facts of the history, language, morals, etc., of a particular people (usually their own) and to claim that these diverse facts really sprang from a primordial unity, which “explained” them all. What was this primordial unity? Why, the national spirit or “culture.” Culture became the mysterious thing which (1) at root divided one people from another and (2) constituted the inner coherence of all a particular people’s art, literature, language, statecraft, morals and history. Of course, no one could put into words exactly what this inner coherence was. That’s why to this day, “culture” is connotatively unique and mysterious. For example, if I say that two peoples are differentiated by their separate history, the mind remains clear and untroubled because I can learn history, and a foreigner can learn my history. The same is true of language, morals, literature, and so forth. But when I say that two peoples are divided by their different cultures, the mind is suddenly troubled, because “different culture” carries overtones of inscrutable otherness, of deep differences in the very structure of the mind.

JUST A MYTH

Now, all of this stuff about cultures and national spirits has been exploded long ago. Anthropologists and sociologists have discovered what missionaries and moss-backed Roman classicists always knew: that culture is not a closed, organic system that is virtually impenetrable from the outside, but rather a loose term for

many essentially unrelated phenomena (language, morals, etc.) and many essentially related phenomena (family structure and morals, for example). In other words, a social order or a culture shows some characteristics of a system and some characteristics of an accidental heap. In short, nothing prevents people of one “culture” from learning the ideas of another “culture” except laziness and disinterest. The myth of deep soul divergencies and unfathomable abysses of mental otherness is just that — a myth.

And if this is true, then nothing prevents a particular doctrine or body of judgments from imposing itself on peoples of all cultures as everywhere plausible and everywhere intrinsically intelligible in the same sense. This, of course, is not to say that a doctrine will be equally congenial to all minds, or that all will grasp it with the same ease, or that considerable education must not accompany this doctrine in order to prepare the ground for it. Not at all. I simply say that nothing in the nature of man or in the nature of human civilization rules out the existence and world-wide acceptance of such a doctrine. And I suppose I need not spell out what Doctrine I am thinking of!

Now the trouble with Fr. Pfeiffer is that he either does not believe that such a doctrine can exist or else he denies that Christianity is such a doctrine. For him, Christianity is a mysterious X which cannot be grasped in itself but can only be seen in its effects. These effects are the successive “interpretations,” I-1, I-20, or whatever, that people of different cultures have made of their “experience” of Christ. Moreover, this Christianity is the more mysterious in that it is not the sole or the pure cause of any of its effects. Rather, in order to produce an effect, Christianity must enter into a synergism with some particular culture, culture being conceived here in the romantic, organic sense. Therefore, none of the effects can be identified with Christianity tout court, just as Pfeiffer says that none of the historical interpretations of the faith can be identified with orthodoxy. As a result, Christianity as an intelligible reality simply disappears, because every alleged “interpretation” of it can be dismissed as merely the Semitic interpretation, or the Hellenistic interpretation, or the Baroque

interpretation, or God knows what. Fr. Pfeiffer may find a certain charm in urging his listeners to consult the crystal ball of their own, thoroughly modern cultural experience in order to produce an “interpretation” which is just the thing for our day, but he overlooks the fact that the result can only be one more fraud in a long string of frauds — for if there is no one interpretation of Christianity, at least in certain essentials, then all interpretations are equally false.

In this connection it is astounding how Pfeiffer can say in one part of his lecture that the New Testament is a Semitic interpretation many of whose key terms have mysterious meanings that can only be guessed at and exhort us in another part of his lecture to use the Bible as a norm. How can what is barely comprehensible serve as a norm for anything?

Pfeiffer’s mind is just a mush. Whenever it suits his purpose, he insists that everything is limited by and immersed in culture; but when it suits a different purpose, he wants something to be above culture and applicable to all. Thus what he says about the New Testament, the quandary he gets himself into, is even more applicable to his culture-model itself. Think of it this way: if culture not only conditions but also “limits” what we can experience and hence what we can formulate as an interpretation of our experience, it follows that we cannot know or speak meaningfully of anything outside our own culture; how, therefore, can Pfeiffer pretend to give us a model that is valid for several cultures (Jewish, Greek, Modern) or even for all cultures? Either Pfeiffer’s model is above culture, in which case there is nothing to prevent the classical statements of doctrine (hypostatic union, for example) from also being above culture, in which case Pfeiffer’s model collapses; or else Pfeiffer’s model is a product of his own culture (and hence limited), in which case the model can tell us nothing about experience, faith, interpretation, and so forth, in other cultures (Jewish, Greek, etc.), in which case the model collapses again.

Fine pickle! I am supposed to interpret an experience which I cannot formulate with the help of a norm whose vocabulary I cannot comprehend, so as to fulfill a model which, on either of two mutually exclusive and exhaustive premises, must collapse. I say to Hell with it! And I only wish the poor kids in CCD classes could say the same.