

Jesuit "Recommendations" Would Mar National Catechetical Directory

By WILLIAM H. MARSHNER

PART I

Msgr. Wilfrid Paradis, director of the National Catechetical Directory project, has received 23 pages of highly dubious recommendations from an outfit called the Commission on Religious Education (CORE) of the Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA). The recommendations touch on such sensitive areas as the nature of sin, freedom of conscience, the act of faith, the obligation to attend Mass, the Sacrament of Penance, and youth ministry.

Before examining these ill-advised recommendations in detail, one may wish to know who

in fact belongs to this Jesuit commission. A few of the names, at least, will make interesting reading. They are as follows: James DiGiacomo, S.J. (Fordham Prep), Paul Fitterer, S.J. (Gonzago, Spokane), Mark Link, S.J. (St. Ignatius, Chicago), William J. O'Malley, S.J. (McQuaid High), Paul Pilgram, S.J. (St. Louis U. High), and Nicholas Schiro, S.J. (Jesuit College Prep, Dallas). James DiGiacomo, of course, is a regular on the catechetical circuit and has already merited criticism in these pages (cf. *The Wanderer*, Sept. 27th, 1973, et al). Fr. O'Malley has achieved a dubious fame for his role as "Fr.

Dyer" in *The Exorcist*. O'Malley is also the author of a high-school religion text called *Meeting the Living God*, recently published by the Paulist Press. The commission members had a day-long meeting with Msgr. Paradis in Dallas on Dec. 27th, 1973, and thereupon "generated" their recommendations.

REDEFINING SIN

The first of the Jesuit recommendations, entitled "Law and Sin," would amount to a serious impoverishment of the definition of sin (or, if you will, a new and defective definition). "Unlike civil penal law," DiGiacomo and company say, "the breaking of the law of God is not what constitutes the sin." Really? This would have been news to St. Augustine, who defines sin very carefully as *factum vel dictum vel concupitum aliquod contra legem Dei aeternam*, that is, "anything done, said, or desired contrary to the eternal law of God" (*Contra Faustum* 1, 22 c. 27). Of course, St. Augustine didn't have the benefit of a Jesuit education, so what would he know?

Anyway, DiGiacomo and friends go on to illustrate their point as follows: "Running a red light might be foolish, but it would not be punishable if there were no written law. On the contrary, rape would be sinful even if the Lord had never spoken on Sinai. The law of God is written into the fibers of what a man is; the law of God merely states that, when a man has done such-and-such, he is to that extent less a man, less what God intended him to be."

THE ESSENCE OF LAWS

From this embarrassingly garbled explanation, it appears that the authors of the recommendation are primarily interested in avoiding an Occamist or Cartesian nominalism, which would reduce the eternal law to Divine caprice. To be sure, Catholic theology holds that God has forbidden rape because it is wrong and not simply that rape is wrong because God forbids it. But the recommendation is so badly worded that this valid point is lost in a thicket of mistakes. Most importantly, the authors seem to impoverish the very notion of law (in a positivistic direction), as though all "laws" as such were purely conventional, morally indifferent regulations like traffic rules, with the result that God's commandments, precisely because they are not morally indifferent, are not properly referred to as "laws." Humbug. Traditional theology is fully alive to the fact that sin is dehumanizing, but it does not hold onto this truth at the expense of another (and related) truth, namely, that sin is a breach of God's law. For this reason, traditional theology has a richness and theocentricity that is missing in the Jesuit recommendation.

Moreover, it is simply not true that God's law "merely states" that a sinner is "less a man" for having sinned. No, the Scripture emphasizes the fact that this sinner is guilty before God and subject to punishment, perhaps even the ultimate punishment of eternal damnation. Then, too, the wording of the Jesuit recommendation suggests that sin might be defined as that which makes a man less a man. Again, that simply is not true. All kinds of things limit and damage human potential (such as poverty, physical disability, lack of education and, for that matter, sheer muddle-headedness). But is it a sin to be poor? Is it a sin to have a broken back? Is it a sin to have skipped Harvard and gone to work? No, and I am far from thinking that even DiGiacomo could think otherwise. Therefore: the question inevitably arises that if not everything that makes a man less a man is a sin, then what distinguishes those dehumanizing things which are sins from those which are not? If DiGiacomo and friends are not prepared to appeal to the Divine law, at some point, in answering this question, then one must wonder whether they have a coherent answer to it.

FAILURES TO GROW IN LOVE?

The CORE types press their recommendation on two grounds, psychological and Scriptural. They suggest that it is "harmful" for children to be taught to obey laws whose rationale they do not understand and which must inevitably, therefore, appear "arbitrary" to their young minds. It is "far more enriching," say the Jesuits, "for a youngster to realize that most of the sins he is likely to

commit are not ultimate-death sins (sic) but failures to grow, failures to reach out in love. They are obstacles to a full love relationship. . . ." But in fact children obey all sorts of rules without knowing what, in retrospect, they would later consider an adequate explanation. You see, the term "arbitrary" is not in their vocabulary and hence doesn't bother them. Moreover, I fail to see the pedagogical difference between telling a child or an adolescent that x is wrong and telling him that x is "a failure to reach out in love." The element of arbitrariness or at least absence of explanation is the same. If the youngster cannot understand the reason why an act is wrong, how is he supposed to understand the reason why it is a failure to reach out in love? Good catechetics means giving children sound explanations, not exchanging traditional vocabulary for more sugary substitutes.

Finally, as to the Scriptural reasons alleged by CORE, one faces a tangle of nonsense such as would disgrace a sophomore term paper. DiGiacomo and friends tell us that their peculiar view of sin "is more in harmony with the whole tone of the Gospel message" and is especially confirmed by St. Paul's words regarding "laws written on stones and laws written on men's hearts." The Old Testament is supposed to point in the same direction by making "the pervasive analogy" for man's relation to God "the marriage covenant rather than a civil contract." Apparently the Jesuits who run high schools in this Country are ignorant of the fact that marriage in the Old Testament is precisely a civil contract and not the product of romantic love that it is for modern teenagers. Secondly, St. Paul's contrast between laws on stone and laws in the heart has nothing to do with a supposed distinction between orientation toward law and orientation toward love-and-growth. Rather, his point is that the same moral law which was once inculcated through the letter of the commandments is now, thanks to the grace of Christ, present in the hearts of the faithful. The grace poured forth in our hearts makes it possible for us to keep the commandments, but they do not cease thereby to be commandments. Finally, the "whole tone" of the Gospel is in fact decisively hostile to a non-legal, man-centered definition of sin. Repeatedly the New Testament refers to sin as *parabasis*, *enomia*, *paranomia* or *parakoe* — all words stressing the aspect of disobedience to God's law. Anybody who has read the New Testament in Greek knows this much, at least. If these Jesuit school-masters wish to persuade us of their educational ideology, let them at least have the decency to fly it under their own flag and not of Holy Writ.

3 CATEGORIES OF SIN?

Under the same title of "Law and Sin" the Jesuits have a further proposal, namely that the National Catechetical Directory should recognize three categories of sin. Venial and mortal won't do anymore. In order to render justice to the complexity of human affairs, says CORE, one must acknowledge something called "serious sin," midway between venial and mortal.

I suppose it would be possible for the Church to adopt such a terminology (it doesn't look heretical on its face), but ordinarily Rome likes to see some basis in Scripture and Tradition for such proposed changes. Well, the Jesuits don't offer any basis in their recommendation beyond an article in *America* by Ladislav Orsy (Dec. 8th, 1973). At last look, publication in *America* was not yet considered a theological note, nor was L. Orsy a hagiographer or a monument of tradition, but you know how fast things are changing in theology today.

The big surprise, however, is the fact that Jesuits did not take their proposed theological innovation to Rome . . . but to Msgr. Paradis in Washington. Apparently they think the National Catechetical Directory would be a nice interim Magisterium, sort of a comfortable spot for do-it-yourself dogma. Fortunately, Msgr. Paradis does not share this irresponsible attitude. He has taken the venial-serious-mortal-sin proposal and shipped it over to the Bishops' Doctrine Committee, where it belongs. Bravo, Monsignor! Now, if you can just find a circular file for the rest of CORE's recommendations, Catholicism in America will be forever in your debt. We shall discuss more of the Jesuits' recommendations in a further installment.

Saints For Our Times



St. Thomas Aquinas, Angelic Doctor

At the close of the nineteenth century, Christianity was threatened with a number of ideologies that claimed to reduce religion to superstition and irrationality. Science, both social and biological, placed the ultimate explanations of man and reality on a material plane; faith was seen as a remnant of a dark and ignorant age, a phenomenon opposed to reason and knowledge. Pope Leo XIII, aware of the dangers involved in current thinking, in 1880 published an encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which proposed a way of answering the materialist charges against the Faith. The proposal was to return to a study of the scholastics, especially St. Thomas Aquinas.

It was seven centuries ago, March 7th, 1274, that St. Thomas Aquinas died at the age of forty-nine while on the way to the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons. He had developed in a lifetime short for a scholar a synthesis of Greek thought and the Christian Faith, resulting in a philosophy that ordered all of reality to the truths of Catholicism. Contrary to the nineteenth-century materialists, St. Thomas taught the unity of the natural and supernatural orders, that they do not contradict, but rather reinforce one another. Philosophy and theology do not contend against one another, theology illuminates philosophical inquiry.

St. Thomas' own life is a reflection of his theology: while he possessed, obviously, a naturally brilliant mind, his thinking was always guided by his interior life. It was noted that he learned more by praying before his crucifix or kneeling before the altar than he did by his studies.

The signs of pious and innocent life were apparent in his childhood, spent in the city of Aquino in the Kingdom of Naples. He was unfailingly generous and prayerful in his even youngest years. His formal studies began at the age of five at the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, and then from 1239 to 1244 he was at the state university of Naples where he first became acquainted with Aristotelian philosophy, and read Aristotle's commentator Averroes.

He already intended to become a priest at this time, and his family planned for him to seek ecclesiastical preferment as a source of financial assistance for them. However, Thomas wanted to become a Dominican and follow their way of poverty and self-denial. He started out on a trip to Paris, where the Dominican General was sending him to escape his parents who were less than enthusiastic about his intentions, but his family had him captured on the way there and kept him prisoner at the family estate for better than a year. While he was confined, his parents, his two sisters, and two of his brothers used every imaginable wile (such as saying his decision would cause his mother to die of sorrow) to get him to change his intentions. Finally, his mother relented and Thomas went on his way to Paris once more.

He then spent three years at the Dominican Priory at St. Jacques and studied with the philosopher Albert the Great. This thinker is known as the man most responsible for effectively introducing Christian Europeans to Greek philosophy. Albert the Great proved a decisive influence on St. Thomas, who was privileged to study with him from 1248-1252 in Cologne. It was at this time that Thomas published his earliest writings, which were commentaries on Aristotle's *Ethics*.

Thomas was quite in demand as a lecturer and preacher (he was known to move his listeners to sobbing when he spoke of the Crucifixion, and to cheers when he spoke of the Resurrection). After his ordination, Thomas came to Paris again to further his inquiries and writings. At the age of thirty-one he became a master of theology at the University of Paris, where he taught for three years. He then went to Italy to teach in Naples, Orvieto, Rome, and Viterbo. His final stay in Paris in 1269 lasted three years, and then he came back to Naples to establish a program of theology at a Dominican institute as the final project in a life of unbelievable achievement.

During the last three months of his life, Thomas concentrated on prayer and ever deeper spiritual growth, laying aside his studies after one day celebrating Mass and stating afterwards that "all I have written seems to me like straw compared with what now has been revealed to me." His death, after an accident which caused a blood clot on the brain, was exceptionally holy — he suffered for almost a month in a cloister, praying as death approached, "Then shall I truly live, when I shall be quite filled with You alone, and Your love."

This same closeness to God marked his entire life. At one time, a voice from his crucifix said, "Thomas, you have written well of Me. What do you want in return?" Thomas replied, "Lord I want nothing else but You." It was this power of grace that enabled him to see that every dimension of life — politics, ethics, psychology — is ordered to the same truth. Leo XIII's idea that St. Thomas' thought is crucially important to disprove claims that Faith is the opponent of reason and nature is doubtlessly even more pertinent today than it was a century ago. For few recognize that Faith should speak to critical moral and philosophical issues.

— Peggy Moen