

12 November 2005.

Archbishop William Levada,
Prefect, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,
Palazzo del Sant' Uffizio,
Piazza del S. Uffizio, 11.
Città del Vaticano. Roma. Italy.

Dear Archbishop Levada,

We are a group of Australian Catholics. We write to seek the assistance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in clarifying a difficulty which has arisen in the local church. It concerns the correct interpretation of the church's teaching on the primacy of conscience.

A number of statements in recent years by Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, are difficult to reconcile with the teaching of the church in this matter. Cardinal Pell's opinions on conscience have gained wide currency in the media over a number of years, and given his prominence in the church, many Australians take his views as normative and representative of Catholic doctrine. Our concern is that his approach to this issue is, at best, not true to the Catholic tradition, although it is being disseminated as an accurate statement of Catholic belief.

For instance, as early as 12 May 1988 in a lecture at La Trobe University he said: 'The doctrine of the primacy of conscience should be quietly ditched, at least in our schools, or comprehensively restated, because too many Catholic youngsters have concluded that values are personal inventions, that we can paint our moral pictures any way we choose'. He restated similar views in an article he wrote in *The Weekend Australian* (September 11-12, 1993). He has consistently repeated this. In his Acton Lecture (4 August 1999) he said: 'Catholic teachers should stop talking about the primacy of conscience. This has never been a Catholic doctrine... such language is not conducive to identifying what contributes to human development'. In his address to the Catalyst for Renewal Bishops' Forum (30 May 2003) he set up a dichotomy between conscience and truth and said: 'It is somewhat misleading to claim that our conscience is free... I believe that the mischievous doctrine of the primacy of conscience has been used to white-ant the church'. As recently as 20 September 2005 in an extended lecture on 'Cardinal Newman and Conscience' he returned to the same theme: 'For some years I have spoken and written against the so-called "doctrine of the primacy of conscience", arguing that it is incompatible with traditional Catholic teaching. Not surprisingly this has in turn provoked a number of hostile public criticisms and quite a number of letters from friends and acquaintances attempting to persuade me of the error of my ways'.

Our problem with his public stance is that he constantly places personal conscience and truth as taught by the church in opposition to each other, and thus distorts the role of both in Catholic tradition. By caricaturing any claim to the primacy of conscience as a rejection of the church's teaching, he sets up a false dichotomy and this results in a rejection of the legitimate role of informed conscience. In his public statements he emphasizes the teaching of the church, but fails to acknowledge that this does not completely exhaust the process. Truth must be assimilated into individual lives. He adopts the stance that any doubt or conscientious questioning is tantamount

to rejecting the magisterium. He seems to adopt an entirely static notion of truth, and omits all reference to church tradition as a process of coming to truth.

We believe that the authentic Catholic tradition is that conscience holds primacy in the process of moral decision-making. Certainly we accept that Catholics are bound to take biblical and church teaching as a central and integral element in moral discernment, but that in the end conscience is the ultimate norm of each person's moral action.

Our fundamental concern is that his explication of Catholic doctrine is inaccurate, misleading, and not true to the Catholic tradition.

Given his position in the Australian church and his stated unwillingness to change his public stance, it is difficult for us to know what to do except to appeal to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. We are simply asking that the Congregation request Cardinal Pell to confine his public comments to the excellent statement on conscience found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Here it is clearly stated that 'Man has the right to act in conscience and freedom so as personally to make moral decisions ... especially in religious matters' (paragraph 1782). *The Catechism* certainly emphasizes the importance of the formation of a right conscience, but it insists that 'a human being must always obey the certain judgement of his conscience'. The same paragraph (1790) goes on to admit that moral conscience can 'remain in ignorance' and make 'erroneous judgements'. Nevertheless Catholics must still follow their conscience. *The Catechism* approvingly quotes Cardinal Newman's dictum that 'Conscience is the aboriginal vicar of Christ' (1778).

Cardinal Pell has taken a very well-known stance on this issue. We do not wish to state publicly our concerns if the Congregation were minded to take appropriate action. Therefore, we would appreciate an early indication of the Congregation's response, so that we can determine what would be the best course for us to take to dispel the notion that Cardinal Pell's views represent genuine Catholic tradition and teaching. Thank you for your consideration of this issue,

Yours sincerely,

Frank Purcell

Signing on behalf of a group of Catholics who have seen this text and have agreed to have their names appended:

Sister Veronica Brady, IBVM, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, University of Western Australia.

Emeritus Professor Max Charlesworth, parent, Professor of Philosophy, Deakin University.

Paul Collins, historian and broadcaster.

Reverend Father Michael Elligate, Chaplain, University of Melbourne.

Judge Chris Geraghty, the District Court of New South Wales.

Marilyn Hatton, parent, adult educator.

John Hill, parent, clinical therapist, marriage and relationship counsellor.

Reverend Father Eric Hodgens, Parish Priest, Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Helen Jagoe, parent, former General Secretary, International YCW.

Reverend Father James Littleton, MSC, educator.

Kathleen McPherson, parent, Community Health Services.

Mark McPherson, parent, Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Consultant, former YCW full-time worker.

Reverend Father Frank Martin, Parish Priest, Archdiocese of Melbourne.

Sister Cecilia Merrigan, CSB, former International Congregational Leader, Sisters of Saint Brigid.

Reverend Father Peter Murnane, OP, Dominican Friar, preacher.

Dr Anne O'Brien, psychologist, adult educator.

Emeritus Professor Tom O'Donnell, Foundation Chair of the Catholic Education Commission, Victoria, former member of the National Catholic Education Commission.

Frank Purcell, parent, lecturer in Politics, La Trobe University.

Bernard Ryan, parent, religious educator, Catholic high school.

Ellen Smiddy, parent, community worker, former YCW leader.

Brian Smiddy, parent, former YCW leader, trade union official.

Mary Stanwix, parent and pharmacist.

Justin Stanwix, parent and barrister.

Kevin Walcot, adult educator.