

Comment

Comment on Tydings' "Shipwrecked in the Spirit"

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Judith Tydings has written an excellent article dealing with controlling groups within her own Roman Catholic Church.

Wisely she reminds the reader that persuasion techniques are not morally neutral. However zealous the followers of Jesus might be to spread his message, they must do it with a respect for truth that imitates his own. They can be mindful of the way he identified himself: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." They should remember that he commissioned his apostles, "Go, teach all nations whatsoever I have commanded you." They will find a demonstration of his own directness in his advice, "All you need say is 'Yes' if you mean 'Yes' and 'No' if you mean 'No.' Anything more than this comes from the evil one." His own simplicity is evident in his exhortation, "Be cunning as serpents yet as harmless as doves."

It is obvious that not everyone within the church or every subordinate organization under its umbrella could master perfectly these Gospel ideals, so when shortcomings occur it is not appropriate to deny them. Tydings cannot be faulted for raising a voice critical of exploitative groups simply because she is Catholic. To deny her the right of dissent would be to make of the church itself a "cult" suppressing the individual conscience.

To verify the consistency of Catholic teaching on the exercise of personal conscience one might look to the textbook which has, for most of this twentieth century, had the greatest influence on the attitude of the clergy: Adolph Tanqueray's *The Spiritual Life*. In his careful analysis of the virtue of Prudence he counsels that "we should seek advice for our actions with docility" but he adds immediately, "This will in no way hinder us from exercising our own powers of discernment by which we are to judge what is well founded both in the advice given and in our personal observation."

Closer to our own day we have the clear articulation of Catholic teaching on conscience and responsibility in the documents of the Second Vatican Council published in 1966. There one may find this fundamental assumption: "In matters of religion no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own belief."

The Vatican Council had an awareness of the hazards of this age: "Many pressures are brought to bear upon men of our day to the point where the danger arises lest they lose the possibility of acting on their own judgment." And there is added, "God has regard for the dignity of the human person whom he himself created...man is to be guided by his own judgment and he is to enjoy freedom."

Some persuasive groups that seek the approbation of the official church often do not have evil intentions. It would seem that there are some reformers who genuinely love the church

and want to work from within to save it. Would that not describe the early Luther? Others may have a hidden agenda and are really on a path to construct a parallel organization and, to accomplish that objective, take advantage of some loyal faithful whom they use as a springboard. Others appear to be plainly unscrupulous in their lust for power and money as they take advantage of devout people who are too trusting.

It has been said that George Orwell's *1984* is really a book about the manipulation of language. Readers of Orwell can recall the 'Ministry of Truth' and the word, "Newspeak." Whatever is meant by the word "cult," it seems as if such groups manage their influence primarily through language. For example, the words "covenant" and "shepherd" are good words with a long and noble history, but they can be used with a different signification for different people. What might seem harmless to the outsider may have a different weight to the initiate. If we depend upon words to share truth, then it is an apt description of Satan to call him "the father of lies."

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