

JMJ

*An Examination of Just Faith*

I had already heard a little about the *Just Faith* program and some concerns regarding it just prior to the time that two members of our parish came to me to share their concerns. One of them had enrolled in the course and brought to me the full set of materials she purchased for the course requesting that I review it. I submit herein the results of my review in a spirit of fraternal correction and concern and to assist pastors and lay persons who lack time to read all the materials; a close examination of the program by the competent ecclesiastical authority is warranted to determine the advisability of its continued use.

In short, the program is a product of liberation theology and promotes the ordination of women, recognition of homosexual marriage, the feminization of God, extreme pacificism and environmentalism, using non-Catholic and Catholic dissenters to present “Catholic Social Teaching.”

The *Just Faith* program is a partnership effort of Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Relief Services. It is billed as a ministry of the Church, “an invitation to a rich spiritual journey into compassion,” to “look more closely at the troubling issues of our times through the lens of compassion and Catholic social teaching.” According to page two of the Notes to participants, week 2, the program sets out to teach the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. However, there is little reference to the encyclicals, Catechism, conciliar documents or the *Summa Theologica* where the Church’s authentic social teaching is to be found. (Nota Bene: one of my sons is taking a course on Catholic Social Teaching at a Catholic University; the curriculum consists of: *Rerum Novarum*, *Mater et Magistra*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Popularum Progressio*, *Octogesima Adviens*, *Laborens Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *Finitissimus Annus*, section 10 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, and sections of the *Summa* on Justice and Cheating/Usury).

The very opening sessions of the *Just Faith* program are problematic. For example, in week 2, the opening prayer invokes 21 “witnesses of hope,” including Mohandes Gandhi—“great soul of peace,” Flannery O’Connor (note: from my acquaintance with the life and writings of this great American writer, I submit that she would strenuously object to *Just Faith* and being prayed to for she was a devout Catholic), Thomas Merton (much of his later work was heterodox), Martin Luther King, Jr., Joseph Bernardin, Albert Schweitzer, concluding with, “All you holy men and women, salt and light for our world, Pray for us.”

Attachment B of the same week lists discussion and dialogue goals, including search for the best “view,” incorporate varied perspectives, etc. There is no reference to seeking, teaching, or understanding the truth as taught by the Church. As Pope Benedict has reiterated, “real education is not possible without the light of truth.”

There are 4 books in the program: 1) Cloud of Witnesses by Wallis and Hollyday, 2) Compassion by Nouwen, et al, 3) The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Teaching, by Mich,

and 4) Amazing Grace by Kozol. **None of them has a Nihil Obstat or Imprimatur** despite the pretensions of this course to present the “rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching.” An examination of the content of the texts reveals significant reasons there is not and should not be an official stamp of the Church’s stamp of approval on any of these books or the program .

The Cloud of Witnesses book is most revealing of the agenda of this program and of content contrary to the authentic social teaching of the Catholic Church. It is clearly stated that, “The articles and interviews in this book have been adapted from material originally published in Sojourners magazine.” The author, Jim Wallis, was founder and executive director of Sojourners. He has written in favor of gay “marriage.” The author, Joyce Hollyday, is a minister in the United Church of Christ. Sojourners is described as non-denominational according to its website, but includes left wing Catholic peace activists and dissenters, a Masonic veterans group, favors gay/lesbian partnerships, has a policy statement in favor of recognition and legal protection for the same, including gay “marriage,” and favors ordination of women, claiming 5 female ordinations and female bishops. This background should constitute sufficient cause to question inclusion of the book as a source of authentic Catholic Social teaching.

In addition, out of 35 articles, only 11 appear to be about known Catholics. I say “known” because the faith of some was not identifiable. For certain, most were not Catholic at all and included a Living Waters pastor, Georgia minister, Episcopal minister, Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, a Presbyterian pastor, a Quaker, three Baptists, one now non-denominational former Methodist then Presbyterian, a Dutch Reformed preacher and a number of others not Catholic but whose denomination was not mentioned. Among the persons featured were a draft dodger, proponent of the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church, one pastor and his wife imprisoned for non-payment of taxes, one whose “consciousness” came from liberation theology and another who said the truth was not the captive of any enterprise or religion.

Among the Catholics featured in the book were many known dissenters such as Father Daniel Berrigan, Sister Joan Chittister, Father Pedro Arrupe and others who criticize the Church rather than advance her authentic teachings. Some examples will suffice:

- Joan Chittister’s unabashed advancement of the ordination of women is championed. She said, “There’s either something wrong with the present theology of ministry, or there is something wrong with the present theology of all the sacraments. If women qualify for baptism, confirmation, salvation, and redemption, how can they be denied the sacrament of ministry?” (Emphasis added). Her arguments that women are ignored in church language and for the feminization of God are given ample play in the text (see attachment).
- Jesuit superior general Pedro Arrupe openly rejected *Humanae Vitae* and his “restructuring” of the Jesuits did much harm to the Order; the circumstances of his removal are unclear to me, but Pope John Paul II passed over Arrupe’s designated successor for another.
- Father Miguel D’Escoto is not permitted to celebrate the Eucharist in public or private.
- Father Elias Chacour, a Catholic priest and pacifist in Israel, attacked the wealth of the Church and described his despair of the institutional Church and its hierarchy.

- Archbishop Dom Camara, who certainly sacrificed for the poor of his native Brazil, was a devotee of Gandhi and criticized the Church for its programs and priorities; at the closing session of Vatican II, he proposed that all the bishops surrender their crosses of precious metals for meltdown and distribution of the proceeds to the poor.
- Father George Zabelka is an extreme pacifist who misconstrues the Gospels to suit his objections to Nagasaki and accuses Christianity of seventeen hundred years of terror and slaughter (see attachment).
- Journalist Penny Lernoux had distanced herself from the Church but returned in the “awakening” of Vatican II, which she described as “set to turn the Church on its head,” while she was herself under the inspiration of liberation theology.

The magisterial authority of the Church was not recognized in this book. There was a nice article on St. Francis of Assisi, who was called the “greatest saint.” This book would be perfectly suited to a study of liberation theology, which, of course, has been soundly refuted by the Church beginning with *Divini Redemptoris*. Pope Pius XI stated that the Church could not cooperate with Marxists. Liberation theology would divert the Church from her mission of salvation to one of social welfare agency.

One of the authors of Compassion was Henri Nouwen, who was described in Cloud of Witnesses as a Dutch priest and contributing editor to Sojourners.. His funeral Mass was described in the book as a “carnival atmosphere” where actors and actresses “breathed life into the gospel reading.” In the Preface, the tone of the book is set with a quote from theologian, Gail O’Day, “Just as it is false to the richness of the Christian tradition to use father language as generic language for God, it ....” This book does more to diminish than to advance the true faith, for example:

- The authors assert that the Gospels support reference to the “womb” of God (pp. 14-16).
- They say we should see compassion not in moralistic terms (emphasis added; the implication is that we should disregard sin, p. 28).
- They wrote that choosing to suffer as “an obedient response to our loving God” is, for Christians, a “false belief that in so doing they were following the way of Jesus Christ.”
- The section on the breaking of bread omits all reference to sacrifice and the Holy Eucharist as the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, the real presence; the sole emphasis is on community and eating bread and drinking wine as a memorial, where we become intimately connected “to the compassionate life of Christ.” (P. 111). Our “bread connections” are a “call to action.” He writes that when people eat bread and drink wine in his (Christ’s) memory, smiles appear on strained faces (p. 132).
- This book is rife with misconstruction and non sequitur too numerous to fully set forth; other examples include pp. 48 (top), 49 (top), 126-7.

The Mich book has some good quotes, including some references to encyclicals and Saints, but they are interlaced with error. For example, St. Boniface’s challenge to the god Thor inspired conversions but led to the unintended consequence of “diminished awe for the sacredness of nature.” (P. 34). We are instructed that every creature, animate and inanimate, can be a “sacrament.” Life issues are discussed with no reference to the evil of contraception.

We are told that there was an early Catholic attitude, still present, that saw humans as the apex of creation and this too often led to exploitation of nature (p. 41). Quoting Sister Elizabeth Johnson, the author explains that “previous theologies would have human beings with their rational souls as superior to the natural world.” Such a ranking, he writes, easily “gives rise to arrogance, one root of the present ecological crisis.” We are told that we need ‘species humility’ (p. 43). I read this and wondered whatever happened to Genesis: man is made in the image and likeness of God and has dominion...???

On pages 43-44, we read that we must “reimagine our place in creation” with these questions, each of which is directly or by implication in conflict with the truth:

- How to preach salvation as healing and rescue for the whole world rather than as solely an individual relationship with God?
- How to let go of contempt for matter, contempt for the body and sexuality, and how to revalue them as good and blessed?
- How to interpret human beings as primarily “earthlings” rather than as pilgrims or tourists whose real home is elsewhere?
- How to recognize the sacraments as symbols of divine graciousness in a universe that is itself a sacrament?
- What kinds of new spiritualities will emerge as we become creation-centered?

The author references *Familiaris Consortio*, then trashes it and exposes his real agenda:

Today, Catholic theology and spirituality does not view the love of another human being as distracting from our love of God. In fact, love of a spouse and child is viewed as participation in divine love.

Sexuality is viewed in more positive terms as a gift of God to be enjoyed and celebrated within committed love and not only tolerated for the sake of procreation. These positive themes provide the starting points for a **reinterpretation of marriage and family** within the Catholic tradition. This revisioning is only in beginning stages. Catholicism and other Christian denominations are still working on understanding the role of women in the church and society and the meaning of **committed homosexual relationships**. (Emphasis added), p. 81

No sugar coating can cover the bitter taste of this poisonous error!

The Kozol book contains wrenching stories from the author’s experiences in South Bronx, significantly centered around St. Ann’s Episcopal Church with its pastor, Rev. Martha Overall, who “confesses” the children. What this book contributes to an understanding of Catholic Social Teaching is a mystery. The book is interesting private reading, although the heralding of it by Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund would have otherwise steered me clear of it.

Interestingly, both of the parishioners who brought to my attention that *Just Faith* was in progress at our church are converts. They are actively engaged in learning the Catholic Faith. One said to me, “Something about this (*Just Faith*) material is really bothering me. I don’t know why, but I am disturbed and irritated when reading it.” She wants to deepen her understanding of the true Faith; most of this material does just the opposite, leads away from it. The disturbance of the spirit is easily understandable.

We possess the truth in all its beauty, richness and wonder; we possess the authentic Magisterium. Why not use it? As the Holy Father has reminded us, real education is grounded in truth.

Respectfully submitted,

Phyllis A. Sower

---

Mrs. Sower has practiced law for 33 years, now part-time, in Franklin County, KY. She is the co-founder and principal of Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy/Corpus Christi High School in Simpsonville, KY. She has studied and taught Apologetics for more than 13 years and reviewed classroom materials for more than 15 years for Catholic schools.