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# Address to Canon Law Society

Richard Cardinal Cushing

*(Editor's Note: This talk was delivered at the 30th annual meeting of the Canon Law Society of America in Boston, Mass., September 11, 1968.*

*Since this applies to doctors as well as priests, we have included it in this issue of LQ. W.J.E.)*

Most of us here tonight are priests of God and men dedicated and committed to the teaching, to the interpretation, to the application and to the implementation of law. We must be, by reason of our ministry and special calling, respecters of the law. By our example of respect and by reason of our dedicated obedience we can and we shall encourage the Christian community and the People of God to observe and to obey the law conscientiously. The laity become confused and scandalized when they observe willful and deliberate violation of the law on the part of those, who, by reason of their vocation, should be its respecters.

Even when it appears that some worthwhile and immediate good could be achieved by violation of law, the long-term result is apt to be scandalous and disastrous. Disrespect for law by those who should have a special

commitment to it, will certainly be the breeding ground of indifference to law on the part of our people.

There is no justification for those among us who take the law into their own hands, who disobey or violate the law, who create and fashion a law unto themselves, or who consider their ideas and programs and ultimate goals above and beyond the law. Good faith and well-intentioned activity cannot excuse. Impatience to change a law or procedure — however well-founded — cannot justify its infraction. Strive to change a law that needs changing — by all means — but obey it until it is changed. Be consistent at all times and under all circumstances.

We note that our Church structure and our theology and our system of law have been described as formalistic, legalistic, casuistic, and unduly concerned over hair-splitting and intricate distinctions. Yet, it is noteworthy that some of those who have thus described our systems are very quick to take refuge in distinctions and legalism, when it appears to favor their position or is helpful in explaining and justifying their point of view.

We hear distinctions made between the doctrine that is certain and a doctrine that is doubtful — seemingly to allow for the use of the axiom and reflex principle that “a doubtful law does not oblige.” We also hear distinctions between a doctrine that is presented as infallible in contrast to a doctrine not so presented — without any reference being made to whether the doctrine — infallible or not — is, in fact, authentic and authoritative.

It certainly seems to be inconsistent and incongruous to challenge an existing system for deficiencies and then to act in a similar manner.

Our future endeavors must be undertaken and carried on in the light of the Second Vatican Council and its teachings. To accomplish this goal, we must know the documents of the Council intimately and thoroughly. We must teach only what the Council Fathers taught. We must study all of the documents of the Council in their context, so that a unified and complete position can be had.

It is clearly evident that the Fathers of the Council did not intend that the message of one document would be inconsistent or contradictory to the message of another document. We must present the teachings of the Council documents as they were intended by the Council Fathers. We must not interpret or interpolate the teachings so as to mislead. We should not give an emphasis that was not conceived or intended in the original discussions. We should not maximize or minimize any one single statement or document to justify a favored position. We must not add to or subtract from the official teaching of the Council Fathers.

Base our future endeavors on the Second Vatican Council — by all means — but let us be sure that we base them on the clear, certain and unquestioned teaching of the Council Fathers.

When we are confronted by matters of substantial doctrine — whether of faith or of moral conduct — we must not judge on the basis of that which is expedient or useful, or that which is acceptable to a majority or large section of the Christian Community; we cannot seek what is merely comfortable, easy, or in line with what is fashionable. Rather, we must judge within that necessary framework, which is at the very foundation of our religion and Church.

We cannot close our eyes to the fact that Christ preached a revelation that was entrusted to Him by His Father; that this gospel dealt in absolutes and in eternal and transcendent truths that were unchangeable; that His teachings were not subject to negotiation or compromise; that He founded a Church on Peter and that there was given to him the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the divine doctrine, to teach it authoritatively and to interpret it authentically; that Peter was to have successors, who would be the Vicars of Christ and who, in turn, were to have the weighty trust of safeguarding the purity of the Gospel; that Peter and his successors were promised the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, Who would inspire, guide and direct them and preserve them from error.

We know Christ encountered dissent among His listeners and apparently even among His apostles. Some of the disagreement arose because of an

inability to understand the sacred mysteries and some resulted from the difficulties and personal inconvenience involved in particular teachings.

Christ did not succumb to pressure; He was not swayed by the number of persons dissenting; He did not attempt to negotiate or to compromise His teaching. Rather, He took the stalwart and difficult stand — refusing to accommodate the doctrine of His Father to the wishes and the convenience of His audience — knowing that absolute and eternal Truth is unchangeable.

As the successor of Peter and as the Vicar of Christ, the Supreme Pontiff, in virtue of His office, has the duty of safeguarding and preserving intact the teaching of Christ and he, thereby, becomes the authoritative teacher and the authentic interpreter of this sacred doctrine.

The Pope has no alternative in conscience except to be loyal and faithful to the trust that has been committed to him.

When the Vicar of Christ teaches — even though not infallibly — he should and must receive something more than a respectable hearing, which may be accorded merely by condescension or by tolerance. The Pope is to be listened to sincerely and conscientiously, and a firm assent — both interior and exterior — must be given to his solemn pronouncements.

In a time of dissent, the Supreme Pontiff must remain as firm as did Christ. He can only remain loyal to his trust to the extent that he preserves

the integrity of doctrine and teaches the true gospel of Jesus Christ. The Pope must be concerned with absolutes and with a truth that is eternal and unchangeable; even though the world and its peoples may be interested in the personal, the relative, the existential, and the changeable.

The Supreme Pontiff must always recall the solemn words of St. Paul to the Thessalonians: “Having met the test imposed on us by God as those entrusted with the Gospel, so we preach, trying to please not men but God.”

Since when did the ease and comfort of a doctrine become the sign by which the Gospel of Christ is to be recognized and identified?

If these were the signs of the Christian life, the sufferings and death of Christ would be an enigma; the hunger, nakedness, imprisonment, shipwreck of St. Paul would be unexplainable and the valiant sufferings and courageous deaths of the martyrs would have been worthless and in vain.

The Supreme Pontiff cannot remain loyal to his trust and teach only those doctrines that will be acceptable to the peoples of the world and which will not prompt dissent. The Vicar of Christ must be mindful of and guided by the observation made by St. Paul to Timothy: “The time will come when men will not listen to sound teaching but, with ears itching, will pile up for themselves teachers who will suit their pleasure. They will turn their hearing away from the truth to fables.”

The right and the responsibility to preserve doctrine, to teach authoritatively and to interpret the

Gospel authentically was vested in the office and in the person of the Supreme Pontiff – not in any other individual or group – not in theologians, canonists, historians, psychologists, sociologists, economists or others.

The Vicar of Christ must seek the opinions, the views, the knowledge, the expertise of the professionals, and he must give careful and studied thought to the material he receives. He must analyze and evaluate it. But, in the final stage, after serious study, prayerful reflection and pleading for the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he alone is competent and qualified, by reason of his office and responsibility, to pronounce what is the true, authoritative and authentic doctrine.

After this pronouncement, all must give a firm interior and exterior assent – even the consultants, whose opinions and views were not accepted and whose suggestions were not followed. The professionals should be heard, but they cannot insist that their positions be adopted.

We must ever be mindful that the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit was officially promised by Christ to His Vicar – not to professionals. Many well-intentioned professionals claim in good faith that they act with the Spirit, and yet they are in disagreement with the Pontiff, who has been promised the Spirit. It is inconceivable and impossible to believe that the Holy Spirit can be in contradiction with Himself.

All the Bishops of the United States – as indeed across the world – recognize the Supreme Pontiff as supreme teacher, and every

Bishop gives a firm interior and external assent to the authoritative pronouncements of the Vicar of Christ in all matters concerning sacred doctrine. This must be our example and inspiration.

It is clearly presumptuous on the part of anyone to claim that a doctrine is in doubt when the Pope officially declares that there is no doubt, or to allege that the Pope is in doubt when he constantly and consistently insists that he is not in doubt.

Conscience can and must be our guide to proper moral conduct, but, to be such, conscience must be formed in a responsible fashion. This requires that the formation be in accordance with an objective code of morality, which is based on absolutes, and with definite reference to the doctrine and teachings of Christ as taught by the Supreme Pontiff, who alone has the responsibility and the competency in these areas.

A conscience, which is formed on a private basis and in accordance with subjective, relative, changeable, purely personal and situational norms, cannot qualify as a responsible conscience and, therefore, cannot be considered as a safe guide for moral conduct.

No responsible or authoritative voice in the Church has ever taught that a conscience, formed in such a private, or relative manner and in opposition to the authoritative teaching of the Church was a reliable guide for moral action. Certainly the documents of the Second Vatican Council do not teach this, and it is less than honest for anyone to present such a doctrine and to try to justify it as a teaching of the Council Fathers.

To know and to follow the teaching of Christ is not merely useful but is essential and necessary for the spiritual growth in virtue and perfection of the people of God. To become perfect, as commanded by Christ, requires us to follow the true doctrine of Christ. Thus, we who are teachers in the Church, must always be careful to present this doctrine in union with the teaching of the Supreme Pontiff.

To do otherwise, is to run the risk of depriving the members of the Church of the requisite means for spiritual growth and of even jeopardizing their eternal salvation. Unless we present and preach the true doctrine, we can be obstacles and stumbling blocks to the spiritual welfare of people entrusted to our care; we can become a scandal to the Christian community

and a source of division and confusion within the Church of Christ. Certainly, this is not the type of service or contribution that an ordained priest of God should render.

I firmly and conscientiously believe that what is needed now – more than anything – is a strong and dynamic faith, whereby the Church, the doctrine of Christ, the religious, spiritual and moral lives of the faithful can be judged in a light that is truly supernatural, not one that is merely rational, scientific and relative as are the things of this world. Spiritual and moral values are more important than the useful and expedient recipes of the world, and such values can only be appreciated by one endowed with a viable faith.

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## ANNOUNCING . . .

**MOST REV. JOHN J. WRIGHT**

Bishop of Pittsburgh

WILL PRESENT THE

**FR. GERALD KELLY LECTURE**

Sunday, July 13, 1969

WALDORF-ASTORIA HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY  
(During the Annual Meeting of the A. M.A.)

4:00 PM – Memorial Mass

5:00 PM – Dinner and Lecture

ALL NFCPG MEMBERS AND GUESTS INVITED