

## THE MISGUIDED FR EMMETT COSTELLO

Fr Emmet Costello, a Jesuit of Australian stock born in Fiji, lived his priestly life in Australia and died on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2013, aged 89. Well known for his proselytising of the wealthy and powerful, he summarised the attitude he took to those he sought to convert to, or return to, the Catholic faith in this fashion: "The more you've got, the more you need to pray... I don't pull my punches and it earns their respect."

One of those he brought back to the faith was the eminent Australian barrister, T E F Hughes QC, son of the Catholic Geoffrey Forrest Hughes MC, AFC, World War I flying ace and President of the Royal Australian Aero Club who served as flying instructor in World War II, a respected Sydney solicitor. The details of Fr Costello's intervention appear in the recent biography *Tom Hughes QC A Cab On The Rank* by Ian Hancock (Federation Press, Sydney, 2016).

Costello contacted 'Mr Hughes' after reading Sandra Hall's article in the *Australian Magazine* of July 1993 where Tom explained that the Pope's Encyclical on birth control 'accelerated' his departure from the Church. Costello sought to reassure him. Paul VI had not designated contraception a mortal sin and had 'made it clear that the document was NOT infallible'. Besides, about 90 per cent of Catholics ignored it and 'many top theologians' thought the Encyclical had 'gravely undermined papal authority'. Costello plied Hughes with books and articles, including some of his own writings. At the end of 1994, Tom launched Costello's book, *Saints, Popular and Relevant*, referring to the author as 'my dear friend'. He later told a Jesuit gathering that Costello's wise advocacy led me back to a path I should never have left'. ... (p. 319)

Not the least of the sufferings faithful Catholics have had to endure in Australia over the last fifty years is the promotion of theological error by priests and religious and the failure, in derogation of their duties, by the Church's bishops to correct them.<sup>1</sup> The average Australian Catholic, grown used to this betrayal of principle, has come to regard it as inappropriate for a bishop to uphold the Church's position. The scandal of episcopal inaction has led many to wonder whether the Catholic position in moral matters is in fact the rational position and to doubt whether it can be defended. Of a piece with this systematic neglect is the silence that greets the assertion by some public figure that he can maintain his standing as a faithful Catholic while departing from the standards demanded by his Church. Catholics hear nothing to counter the argument advanced by the secular-humanist/atheist lobby that a stand held as a result of religious belief should not be imposed on the rest of society, or to show that the secular-humanist/atheist position is itself a belief system which lacks any rational basis.

The intellectual poison of the age is subjectivism whose burden it is that truth is determined not by reality but by what men think about reality. In theology this manifests itself in the assertion that Catholic principle is not determined by the Church's constant teaching, but *by what the believer is prepared to accept* as the Church's teaching. The subjectivist flaw is well demonstrated by Fr Costello's reported summary of the Catholic teaching on contraception. The implicit assertion of the superiority of individual conscience reveals its provenance, Protestantism. The subjectivist flaw flourished in

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1 It is difficult to recall any Australian bishop publicly upholding the Catholic position on any moral issue since November 1972 when Bishop Bernard Stewart of Sandhurst criticised the leader of the Australian Labor Party, Gough Whitlam, and a number of the party's representatives over their attitude towards the evil of abortion.

many of the reasonings of the bishops of the Second Vatican Council, most notably in their collective rejection, at the urging of their *periti*, of the constant teaching of the Church in respect of the issue of so-called religious freedom. One has only to study the teaching of Pope Pius IX in *Quanta Cura* (8<sup>th</sup> December 1864)<sup>2</sup> and Pope Leo XIII in *Libertas praestantissimum* (20<sup>th</sup> June 1888) and compare with that teaching what passes for reasoning in *Dignitatis Humanae* (7<sup>th</sup> December 1965), to see the betrayal of principle in which those bishops, and the Pope who supported them, engaged.<sup>3</sup> It was no coincidence that the bishops laboured throughout the Council to reconcile Catholic teaching with Protestant ambivalence.

It has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church for more than 1,500 years that contraception is a breach of moral principle. It is so because it entails an abuse of the generative faculty, the elevation of the means (the pleasure of the sex act) over the end for which it is ordained, the act in which husband and wife cooperate as instruments in God's act of creation of a new human being. Paul VI's encyclical, dilatory in its delivery and defective in its prefatory averments, yet confirmed the teaching in documents of innumerable of his predecessors. A better Jesuit than Fr Costello, the American moral theologian, Fr John C. Ford, had remarked trenchantly in 1968 that had the Pope failed to confirm that teaching, he, Fr Ford, would have had to leave the Catholic Church because such failure would have demonstrated that it could not be what it claimed to be, the Church established by Almighty God. The teaching that contraception is intrinsically evil was repeated by Pope John Paul II on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1981 in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (n. 32) and, contemporaneously with Fr Costello's approach to Mr Hughes, in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1993 (n. 80).<sup>4</sup>

If what Fr Costello is reported to have said to Mr Hughes is accurate—and we have no reason to doubt Ian Hancock's summary—he deliberately misled him as to that teaching. He misled him also as to the effect of what Paul VI *said* about that teaching, though it may be Fr Costello was drawing a conclusion from the reprehensible conduct of Vatican officials in what became known as 'the Washington Case' undermining the initiative of Patrick Cardinal O'Boyle in disciplining his priests for refusal to endorse the encyclical. (Cf. George Weigel's *The Courage to be Catholic*, New York, 2002, pp. 68 et seq.) It was not the encyclical that undermined papal authority but the Pope's refusal to support his Archbishop. The Pope undermined his own authority. Dr Weigel relates what followed.

Theologians, priests, and nuns who publicly dissented from *Humanae Vitae*—who said that the Church's teaching about the morally appropriate way to regulate births was false—were encouraged by the Truce of 1968 to continue, even amplify, their dissent. There were going to be no serious penalties on fundamental breakdowns in ecclesiastical discipline. Theologians, priests, and religious men and women under vows of obedience could, in effect, throw a papal encyclical, a solemn act of the Church's teaching authority, back in the Pope's face—and do so with impunity. The culture of dissent, professional division, was born.

The bishops of the United States learned some things, too. Bishops who wanted to protect the authoritative teaching of the Church by using sanctions approved by canon law against dissenters learned that they'd better not do so if imposing those penalties involved major public controversy... Whatever its intent, the Truce of 1968 taught the Catholic bishops of the United States that the Vatican would not support them in maintaining discipline among priests and

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2 N. 6, and the attached *Syllabus of Errors*, n. 15

3 Indeed, Paul VI had himself betrayed the Church's constant teaching on the point just two months prior in the course of his *Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations*.

4 Cf. n. 2370 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

doctrinal integrity among theologians... (Ibid. pp. 70-1)

*Exempla trahunt* : the Pope's failure of nerve was to have immense ramifications. The disposition to pander to the secular inculcated by the bishops at Vatican II was extended to morality and Catholic principle compromised by inaction.<sup>5</sup> The drive to indulge in moral evil within the secular populace, which might have been balanced, as it had been for 150 years, by the Church's stringent and persistent opposition, now proceeded without restraint. Contraception flourished and the natural revulsion of men and women for such conduct was submerged beneath the moral pressure elicited by immoral popular demand. The move to justify induced abortion, the deliberate killing of the unborn, followed and society has reached the point where these twin evils have reached plague proportions.

There is more. Fr Costello misrepresented the effect of any view Paul VI may have expressed about the encyclical. Moral teaching is either infallible or it is not : what a pope may think about it is irrelevant. The issue can be illustrated with remarks attributed to Sir Thomas More in the play *A Man For All Seasons* when apprised by his son in law, Will Roper, of the passage of an Act through Parliament to enforce the administration of an oath respecting King Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn.

More : What is the oath ?

Roper : It's about the marriage, sir

More : But what is the wording ?

Roper : We don't need to know the [*contemptuous*] wording—we know what it will mean.

More : It will mean what the words say ! An oath is *made* of words.

If *the words* in a pope's teaching comply with the four requirements laid down by the Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* (18<sup>th</sup> July, 1870) the teaching is infallible. [DS 3074-5] The teaching in *Humanae Vitae* met those requirements. *Ergo* it was infallible, and any private view Pope Paul may have expressed about it did not matter.

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At the heart of Fr Costello's misstatement of the Church's position is a misunderstanding of the nature of the Church of which he was a priest. The Catholic Church is not the Church of Pope Paul VI and the bishops of the Second Vatican Council. It is not the Church of John Paul II, or of Benedict XVI, or of the current Pope. Nor was it the Church of Fr Emmet Costello SJ. The Catholic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ ; the living Christ ; Christ risen from the dead *cui mors ultra non dominabitur* (*Romans* 6 : 9). It is Jesus Christ, not the Pope, Who is the head of that Church. The Pope is but His vicar. The soul of the Catholic Church is the Holy Spirit. The end of the Catholic Church is the union of its members with God the Father in heaven. The Church is not, as innumerable incompetent churchmen around the world from the Pope down persist in saying, an entity afflicted with shortcomings. She is a divine thing ; indefectible. Belloc summarised her gravitas and influence here :

There is one thing in the world which is different from all other. It has a personality and a force.

It is recognised and (when recognised) most violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church.

Within that household the human spirit has roof and hearth. And outside it is the Night.<sup>6</sup>

It is the Church's ministers, ministers like Fr Costello, who are afflicted with shortcomings.

<sup>5</sup> The Declaration of the Council's bishops in *Dignitatis Humanae* was marked by similar ambivalence. Unctuously (in n. 1), they asserted that their teaching "leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ". They proceeded in the remainder of the document to betray that doctrine.

<sup>6</sup> Hilaire Belloc, Letter to Dean Inge, *Essays of a Catholic*, London, 1931

There is a further reason behind Fr Costello's misstatement of the Church's position. It derives from an error much in vogue, a flawed understanding of the virtue of mercy, which has its provenance in the *Opening Speech* of John XXIII to the bishops of the Second Vatican Council. Mercy is not, as that Pope implied, something soft and yielding. It is as hard as a rock face. Mercy is "sorrow at another's misfortune (*miser cordia*) coupled with a desire to help him" (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 30 a. 1). "God acts mercifully," St Thomas says, "not... by going against His justice but by doing something more than justice." (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 3, ad 2) When Christ said, "If your right hand should lead you to sin, cut it off... for it is better that one of your members should perish than your whole body be cast into hell", He was not indulging in hyperbole as many preachers seem to think.

Thus, it is an act of mercy to tell the sinner to his face, as did the Curé of Ars (St John Vianney) in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, and Padre Pio in the XX<sup>th</sup> : "You are going to hell !" It is a failure in mercy to dissemble with him over his sins, to tell him God will forgive him without contrition and a firm purpose of amendment. It is reprehensible for a priest to advise a sinner to return to the reception of the Blessed Eucharist without this conversion of heart as many in the Church, from the current Pope down, are doing. A priest who promotes this false conception of mercy cooperates formally in the grave sin of sacrilege. Thus, also, is it an act of mercy to discipline the recalcitrant. The astute will recognise in the failure of Pope Paul VI to support the Archbishop of Washington in 1968 a reflection of his predecessor's flawed understanding of mercy.

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No one could doubt the attractiveness of Fr Costello's personality, or his zeal for souls<sup>7</sup>. But *beauty is fleeting and charm is deceitful*, and zeal must be rightly directed. Christ's Church is an extension of Christ Himself. It is she, in union with her Head, not the priest with his private opinions, who lays down the preconditions of repentance and contrition to be met before one may return to the sacraments.

Michael Baker

17<sup>th</sup> March, 2017—*St Patrick*

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7 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVXY6kTNP80>