

CATHOLICS WHO DENY THE CHURCH'S AUTHORITY

"The claim of conscience in the end took the place of the claim of Rome."

Sir Maurice Powicke
The Reformation in England

Catholics, in the very act of embracing the faith given them by God, exercise their conscience, that is, their moral judgement, on the fundamental question whether they accept Jesus Christ and His Church as holding authority from God to teach. Once they have made this acceptance, they are obliged, indeed obliged by their conscience, to follow the authoritative guidance that comes from Christ and His Church.¹

In the public denials of their obligation to follow the directions of their local bishops during the recent debates over bills for laws condoning the abuse of human embryos in stem cell research in State Houses in Australia, certain Catholic politicians appealed to personal conscience.

In reminding them of their obligations as Catholics, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney and Archbishop Barry Hickey of Perth simply repeated the constant teaching of the Catholic Church on the sanctity of human life. The human embryo is no less a human being than the adult. No one may interfere with the life of the embryo without breaching God's law.

The rejection of this moral teaching by these Catholics involves the exercise by them not of a freedom of personal conscience but of Martin Luther's 'private judgement': it is Protestantism. These neo-Protestant Catholics conduct themselves like all Protestants—like all heretics. Christ and His Church may speak, but they know better.

The most defective public statement on the topic came from a Catholic priest, the Jesuit, Fr Frank Brennan. He said—

"Every Catholic is required to form and inform their conscience and to act upon it... Every Catholic will be informed by statements made by church authorities but... if there be a conflict between the stance of church authority and the individual's conscience, the individual has no option but to act from their conscience."²

Fr Brennan was parroting here the Protestant arguments advanced by Karl Rahner and his ilk 40 years ago to justify the rejection by Catholics of their Church's infallible teaching on the illicitness of contraception. And, whether it is dressed up as a claim of conscience or an appeal to the great goods that allegedly will result to mankind from embryonic experimentation, the same issue is at stake as was the case in 1968, the

¹ Cf. the statement of Bishop William Philbin, Bishop of Down and Connor from 1962 to 1982, in a 1968 pastoral letter to his flock. It is reproduced by Fr John McKee in his *The Enemy Within The Gate*, Lumen Christi, Houston, 1974, p. 227.

² Quoted in *The Australian*, 7 June 2007, p. 3.

reduction of that which is in its nature an end (the human being) to the level of a means. In the earlier case the potential human being was prevented from existing at all; in the present he is permitted to exist but only to serve the ends of others.

There can be no valid claim of conscience against the Catholic Church. Fr Brennan does not understand the nature of the institution of which he is a member. The Catholic Church is not a human but a divine thing. Its members may err, but *it* does not err. Its head is God—Jesus Christ; its enlivening soul is God—the Holy Spirit; its end is God—the Blessed Trinity. Its whole purpose, its very reason for existence on earth, is to guide conscience in faith and morality. No one can claim that his conscience is superior to God’s direction. When the Church speaks it is God who is speaking.

“He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you rejects me, and rejects the one who sent me.”³

Michael Baker
10th June 2007—*Corpus Christi*

³ Luke 10: 16