

Theological Deception

By Jim Seghers

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul warns, "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:8). Failure to heed this admonition has been the cause of many of the errors currently embraced by Catholics. Theological deception has been a major contributor to the present state of doctrinal confusion.

Anthony J. Wilhelm's popular book *Christ Among Us: A Modern Presentation of the Catholic Faith*¹ will serve to illustrate the diabolical craftiness of this fraud. This edition has a Nihil Obstat by Rev. Thomas G. Lumpkin Censor Librorum, and an Imprimatur by John Cardinal Dearden, Archbishop of Detroit. On the page with the publication information is the following statement: "The *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error." The statement conditions the unsuspecting reader to believe that the content of Wilhelm's book is fully in accord with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Such is not the case.

Undermining the Eucharist.

In Chapter 17, "The Eucharist in Christ's Church Today" under the sub-heading "The Mass and Christian Unity," one finds the following statement. "In the Catholic view the full sacramental **sign** of unity and grace comes about only through the instrumentality of a priest, at Mass. Yet when the eucharist is celebrated in another Church there is present in some way the reality of the eucharistic mystery; despite the frequent lack of valid priestly orders which expresses the unity of the Church, there is **yet some real presence of Christ in these "other eucharists**. A devout non-Catholic receiving the eucharist in his church **might have more of the reality of the eucharist** than a lukewarm Catholic."²

There are several objectionable assertions found in this quotation. Wilhelm stresses the sign value of the Blessed Eucharist without affirming that it is really Jesus' body and blood, soul and divinity. This is because Wilhelm has already rejected the defined doctrine of transubstantiation. "When we say that the bread and wine 'become Christ' we are not saying that bread and wine are Christ, nor are we practicing some sort of cannibalism when we take this in communion. What we mean is that the bread and wine are a sign of Christ present, here, in a special way-not in a mere physical way, as if condensed into a wafer; somehow his presence has 'taken over' the bread and wine, so that, for us who believe, it is no longer merely bread that is present, but Christ himself."³

Wilhelm also blurs the reality of Christ's eucharistic presence after the words of consecration in a valid Mass with the merely symbolic eucharists of "other churches". What does "some real presence of Christ" mean? Jesus is either physically present in the Eucharist or he is not. The consecrated host is truly Jesus. An unconsecrated host is merely bread.

Lastly, Wilhelm makes the reality of Christ's eucharistic presence dependent on the fervor of those attending the liturgical service. If the faith of a "devout non-Catholic" brings about "more of the reality of the eucharist" than does that of a "lukewarm Catholic," it is logical to conclude that the faith of the congregation effects Christ's presence, not the words of consecration spoken by a validly ordained priest.

¹ Revised edition, (New York: Newman Press, c. 1967 & 1973).

² Ibid., p. 264 emphasis added.

³ Ibid., p. 244. The Catholic Church has never taught that Jesus is "condensed into a wafer," but that he is truly present, body & blood, soul & divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine. In Communion the Catholics taste the accidents of bread and the accidents of wine. In other words our senses encounter the taste, smell, touch, etc. of bread and wine, but we receive under that appearance the substance of the risen Christ, who comes into our bodies to transform us into his nature.

Wilhelm supports his astonishing statement by citing the Decree on Ecumenism, no. 22. Clearly, the author intends that the reader believe the Second Vatican Council supports his assertions. This is a deception. Section 22 in the Decree on Ecumenism has three paragraphs. The first paragraph affirms the validity of all properly performed baptisms. The second paragraph asserts that baptism creates a sacramental bond among all the baptized and is "ordained toward a complete profession of faith." The final paragraph states the following:

"Although the ecclesial communities separated from us [non-Catholic baptized Christians] lack the fullness of unity with us which flows from baptism, and although we believe they have not preserved the proper reality of the eucharistic mystery in its fullness [their eucharist is not the body of Christ], especially because of the absence of the sacrament of Orders, nevertheless when they commemorate the Lord's death and resurrection in the Holy Supper, they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and await his coming in glory. For these reasons, the doctrine about the Lord's Supper, about the other sacraments, worship, and ministry in the Church, should form subjects of dialogue."

Clearly, there is nothing in *Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 22 that supports Wilhelm's position.

Premarital sex not sinful for the engaged.

Another area of Catholic teaching that is frequently under assault relates to the Church's traditional prohibition of premarital sex. Using *Christ Among Us* as an example one discovers a continuing pattern of theological misdirection and deception.

In discussing the sexual expression of love Wilhelm makes the following statement. "Even a couple deeply in love, who experience how naturally sexual intimacies can express their love, must realize that a true and mature love requires discipline and sacrifice. They will fully express their love sexually only **when the marriage commitment has been made**."⁴ This quotation seems to affirm Catholic teaching, if "only when the marriage commitment has been made" refers to the exchange of vows on the wedding day.

As a matter of fact Wilhelm does support this position as an **ideal**. "The act of intercourse is the fullest possible physical expression of the couple's total giving to each other. The Christian ideal, then, is that it should take place when there has been the public, total and final commitment of one to the other in the marriage ceremony."⁵ There is misdirection in this statement. If "intercourse is the **fullest possible physical expression** of the couple's' total giving to each other," why is a "public, total and final commitment" needed "in the marriage ceremony?"

The reality is that living out the "public, total and final commitment of one to the other in the marriage ceremony" is the "fullest possible physical expression of the couple's total giving to each other." Intercourse is one limited expression of that complete donation of self made in marriage. It is the marriage commitment that elevates and gives sacrificial meaning to the act of intercourse, not the other way around.

Wilhelm's use of the term "ideal" is also flawed. The word ideal refers to a standard of excellence or perfection. When the rich young man came to Jesus and asks what he must do to be saved, he is given the answer, "Keep the commandments." However, when he asked what he must do to be perfect - the ideal - he is given a different answer. Wilhelm's use of "ideal" prepares the reader to accept deviations from the ideal.

"Some couples **feel** that they have a deep, mature, and permanent commitment to one another before the marriage ceremony-and sometimes it has its consummation in the sexual union-and often in **the judgment of the couple** this is not wrong."⁶ Feelings are often deceptive. They do not determine right and wrong. Neither does

⁴ Ibid., pp. 215-216 emphasis added.

⁵ Ibid., p. 323.

⁶ Ibid., p. 323 emphasis added.

one's subjective judgment. "Deep, mature, and permanent commitments" are determined by behavior, not by feelings or personal judgments. Remaining chaste is the proof of a "deep, mature, and permanent" commitment.

An analogy with the priesthood might prove illuminating. A seminarian may feel he has a deep, mature and permanent commitment to the priesthood. He may also judge that he has an abiding love for the Mass and the Sacrament of Confession. However, if he attempts to say Mass and give absolution on the day before his ordination both actions have no validity - regardless of the intensity of his personal convictions.

"Priests who are counselling couples sometimes make a distinction between premarital sex-regarded as wrong in itself in Christian tradition-and pre-ceremonial sex. In the latter, '...a couple mean to express the fact that their lives are united and that they are now willing to accept all that is entailed in sexual intercourse as their unity in one flesh...'"⁷ This silly statement is utterly defective. First the distinction between "premarital sex" and "pre-ceremonial sex" is a distinction without a real difference. Secondly, it is so unconditionally subjective as to be useless as a norm of morality. The fact is the lives of the couple are not matrimonially "united" no matter what they feel. In addition, what does their willingness "to accept all that is entailed in sexual intercourse as their unity in one flesh" mean? It certainly has no binding effect, as many pregnant single women can attest. Is a formal engagement required before premarital sex becomes pre-ceremonial sex? What about on the first date? This nonsensical distinction is nothing more than a permission slip to sin.

Wilhelm sets forth a second argument to buttress his attempt to undermine the Church's unwavering teaching regarding premarital sex. "One Catholic theologian writing on this today says: '... when there is a proportionately grave inconvenience, pre-ceremonial intercourse is not premarital intercourse, even if we take into consideration one's ecclesial reality (i.e., that one is not yet married in the Church). "No pre-ceremonial intercourse," therefore, is not an absolute principle and never was considered one by Catholic moralists. Exceptions are possible when there is serious inconvenience...'"⁸

The statement that premarital intercourse was "never considered" an "absolute principle" by "Catholic moralists" is blatantly false. One need only read the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church. But even if it were true, the point is irrelevant. All the theologians in the world, stacked one on top of the other, do not form the foundation of truth. Revelation teaches that the Church is the pillar and foundation of truth, not theologians (1 Tim 3:15). Christ built his Church on Peter. It was to Peter and to his successors that Jesus entrusted the keys of his authority, not to theologians.

"Exceptions are possible," we are informed, "when there is serious inconvenience." This assertion logically leads one to inquire about what constitutes a "serious inconvenience." Wilhelm provides the interpretation. "By "serious inconvenience" Fr. Dedek means a serious difficulty, one that greatly impeded the deep, personal relationship of the couple to one another."⁹ What this presentation provides is nothing more than a rationalization by which engaged couples can justify premarital sex.

The Damage.

If *Christ Among Us* was a dry, obscure tome hidden away in some library it could, perhaps, be dismissed as inconsequential. Unfortunately, the book was distributed for popular consumption. The first edition produced 200,000 copies. Wilhelm, formally a Paulist priest, was on the staff of the Catholic Center at the University of California, Berkeley when the revised edition appeared in 1973. He spent many years in adult education. In 1984, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, ordered the imprimatur withdrawn. However, it is estimated that almost 2,000,000 copies were printed. Even today it is not surprising to find some edition of *Christ Among Us* used in CCD and RCIA classes.

⁷ Ibid., p. 323.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 323-324 citing John F. Dedek, *Contemporary Sexual Morality*, p. 43.

⁹ Ibid., p. 324.

Sadly, *Christ Among Us* is far from an isolated example of the deceptive books and articles that have undermined the Catholic faith in the last decade. It is no wonder that many Catholics do not believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It is not surprising that many Catholics are confused about those moral issues that touch upon human sexuality. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The authentic teaching of the Catholic Church has always been available to those who had the time and the resources to check out Conciliar documents and papal encyclicals. For the average Catholic, however, this has not proven practical.

However, Catholics now have a awesome resource in the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#). It provides a wonderful summary of what the Church authentically teaches. Since the Catechism is extensively footnoted one can easily dig deeper into Church teaching by consulting *The Companion to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is a compendium of texts referred to in the [Catechism](#).

September 9, 1999