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FROM WASHINGTON OFFICE
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Catholics Complain
About Secret Office

By W. Barry Garrett

ROME (BP)-- This Baptist's blood pressure rose somewhat as he listened to a detailed explanation of the procedures of the Holy Office (the modern version of the Inquisition) at the Vatican. However, as he reflected on the fact that these methods are under sharp criticism from some Catholic quarters and that the U. S. Bishops Press Panel was exposing this problem to the news media of the world, he had a better appreciation for the struggle for change in the Catholic Church.

At the press panel Msgr. Henry Cosgrove, an American member of the Holy Office, explained in detail the membership of the Holy Office, the procedures which it followed, and the function it performed in the church. He made it clear, however, that he was bound by secrecy on some matters. He refused to answer questions on specific cases and he would not express opinions about current attacks on the Holy Office.

It was plain that in refusing to answer certain questions he was avoiding coming under inquiry by the Holy Office himself. He said, "After all, I like to sleep at night, too!"

The first Inquisition, according to Cosgrove, was created by Pope Paul III in 1542. The office is an instrument of the pope alone and has been adjusted many times by succeeding popes. He emphasized that it was not to be confused with the Spanish Inquisition, which left a trail of terror and blood in its wake.

Five areas come under the competence of the Holy Office: (1) safeguarding the doctrine of faith and morals; (2) judging certain "crimes" which come under its jurisdiction; (3) deciding questions relating to marriage that are referred to it; (4) examining, prohibiting and condemning books and publications of any kind that are not satisfactory to the church; and (5) dealing with "everything pertaining to the Eucharistic fast for priests celebrating mass."

The Holy Office, under the authority of the pope, makes its own rules and "proceeds according to its own mode of action and institution."

The occasion for the panel discussion was an earlier attack on the procedures of the Holy Office by Cardinal Joseph Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, Germany. As one of the leaders for reform in the Catholic Church Frings made this proposal:

"The distinction between administrative and judicial procedures in the Roman Curia should be extended to all areas, including the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office. Its procedures are out of harmony with modern times, are a source of harm to the faithful and are a scandal to those outside the church. No Roman congregation should have authority to accuse, judge, and condemn an individual who has no opportunity to defend himself. With all due reverence and gratitude for the devoted individuals who spend their lives in the difficult work of the Holy Office we feel that its methods should be basically revised."

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Later in the same morning debate before the council fathers, Cardinal Alfredo Ottoviani, Secretary of the Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, struck back at those who condemned the procedures of the Holy Office. He is paraphrased by the council's press office to have said:

"It should not be forgotten that the Prefect of the Holy Office is none other than the Sovereign Pontiff himself. The criticisms formulated proceed from lack of knowledge, not to use a stronger term, of the procedures of this Sacred Congregation. No one is ever accused, judged, and condemned without a thorough previous investigation carried on with the help of competent consultants and experienced specialists. Besides, all decisions of the Holy Office are approved by the pope personally, and thus such criticisms are a reflection on the Vicar of Christ."

In the briefing by Msgr. Cosgrove, he said that all decisions of the Holy Office were arrived at in the interest of truth and justice. In cases where a person himself is on trial, Cosgrove continued, the person has a hearing, is represented by competent legal aid, and every angle of his case is considered. On the other hand, when a person's book or writing is being considered, he does not have a right of personal appearance.

When final decisions are reached no explanation is given for the action taken, and there can be no further appeal by the convicted party.

During the question period Cosgrove was asked if he had ever questioned the propriety of the "secrecy" rule of the Holy Office. He replied that he had never done so, because this rule was made by the Holy Father himself, and that "he knows better than I."

In response to a question about why there is so much widespread Catholic objection to the procedures of the Holy Office, Msgr. Gustave Weigel, a canon law peritus (expert) at the council gave three reasons. They are: (1) opposition to the secrecy rule; (2) dissatisfaction over the fact that an author is not allowed to appear and defend his work; and (3) only one school of thought among Catholics is represented in the decisions rendered.

The reform of the Holy Office does not come within the authority of the Council of Bishops now in session. The reason is that the Holy Office is a creation of the pope himself and he exercises supreme control over it. Whether or not the pope will heed the clamoring voices for reform of this area of the church's life remains to be seen. No bishop or expert on the press panel would venture as much as a guess in this direction.

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