

Archbishop Burke speaks out on coach, conscience

ST. LOUIS – People who represent Catholic institutions have an obligation to “show respect for the teachings of the church” and not to take public positions contrary to those teachings, Archbishop Raymond L. Burke of St. Louis said in an interview with his archdiocesan newspaper.

In the interview with St. Louis Review staff writer Jennifer Brinker, published in the newspaper’s Feb. 1 edition, the archbishop discussed comments in favor of abortion and stem-cell research made by Rick Majerus, the men’s basketball coach at Jesuit-run St. Louis University.

But the archbishop also expanded the discussion to include questions of conscience and Catholic identity.

“Here is someone who makes a point to identify himself as a Catholic and then takes positions that are contrary to some of the most sacred teachings of the church – teachings with regard to the inviolable dignity of every human life from the moment of its beginning,” Archbishop Burke said of Majerus.

“It gives scandal to other people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, if they hear a Catholic give an interview to the media, saying that I am proud to be a Catholic but at the same time I hold these views,” he said.

Another concern was based on Majerus’ position as “a very prominent member of the St. Louis University community,” Archbishop Burke said. “Whatever his personal positions may be in regard to procured abortion or embryonic stem-cell research, he’s obliged as a public figure from a Catholic university to show respect for the teachings of the church. For him to say these things brought my concern to a new level.”

During an impromptu television interview Jan. 19 at a political rally for Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., in St. Louis, Majerus told a reporter for KMOV-TV that he was “pro-choice, personally” and “very much an advocate for stem-cell research,” although he

did not specifically mention embryonic stem-cell research. He also identified himself as being Catholic.

Archbishop Burke said he would have been concerned about Majerus' remarks even if he were not Catholic.

"He still represents a Catholic institution, and so even though he might belong to some faith or belief that accepts procured abortion, he would be obliged to respect the fact that the Catholic Church ... teaches that abortion is an intrinsic evil; and therefore he would not publicly espouse such positions," he said.

Archbishop Burke said he did not raise the issue of excommunication or denial of Communion for Majerus, saying that reporters had brought up the question.

"When it was brought up to me, I said that is a matter that first has to be dealt with pastorally with the individual," said the archbishop, who was in Washington for the March for Life Jan. 22 when he was first asked by reporters about Majerus' comments.

"I also said I was confident that the university would address the situation and correct it. I also did not mix myself into the administration of the university. I expressed confidence that the university would do the right thing," he said.

In a statement released Jan. 22, St. Louis University said, "Majerus' comments were his own personal views and he was not speaking for St. Louis University. The comments were made at a nonuniversity event and he was not there as a university representative."

The statement also said that "as a Catholic and Jesuit university St. Louis University's mission, vision and values support the Catholic Church's positions and teachings on abortion and embryonic stem-cell research."

On Feb. 6 a spokesman for the university told Catholic News Service no further comment was expected.

Archbishop Burke said in the Review interview that the incident involving Majerus prompted "a profound sadness" in him.

“At a time when in the church we need to give such a strong witness to the dignity of human life and the respect-life apostolate, this counterwitness is being given,” he said.

“My main concern was to correct any perception that it’s acceptable for Catholics to be in favor of procured abortion or embryonic stem-cell research,” he added. “And above all, no Catholic institution could have its representatives espousing such positions.”

The archbishop said some people are confused about questions of freedom of speech, academic freedom and conscience.

He said academic freedom “gives you a freedom to make declarations within your particular area of competence, and according to the canons (laws) for investigation of the truth. It doesn’t give you a kind of heightened freedom to make declarations that are contrary to the truth.”

In a similar vein, “the primacy of the conscience” does not mean “that whatever I feel or think becomes then the right thing to do,” Archbishop Burke said. “Your conscience has primacy in as much as it is conformed to the truth, and as much as it is properly informed.”

He said that if a Catholic public figure is “struggling with his or her adherence” to a church teaching, “then the correct thing to do is to be silent – certainly not to expound error or to air doubts that you’re trying to resolve in your own mind.”

And if a Catholic is convinced that church teaching on abortion or other serious matters is wrong, he said, “my response to that is you are in a very serious state of error, and that you need to get help to rectify your conscience. Your conscience is wrongly formed. And you need to get whatever help it takes to form your conscience properly in accord with the church’s teaching.”