

Under a new set of rules put into effect on October 1, 1995, the 2,000 lay workers in the Vatican City, including secretaries, custodians, and employees at art museums and other offices could lose their jobs if they do not adhere to the positions on moral issues of the Catholic Church. The new rules are laid out in a fifty two page document entitled Declaration of Moral Work, which states that "Workers are required even in private life to profess their Catholic faith and behave according to its principles and requirements." Union officials have hired a lawyer to examine the legitimacy of the new rules. The Vatican City, although located in Rome, has the status of an independent state. "Are these rules too repressive, I don't think so," said Cardinal Rosadio Jose Castillo Lara, President of the Commission in charge of running the Vatican City State. "They are not about holding down liberty, or modifying people," said Cardinal Castillo Lara, "but really about using freedom in an appropriate manner."

Are the new rules put into effect for employees in the Vatican City morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The requirement imposed upon lay workers in Vatican City "to profess their Catholic faith even if private life, and behave according to its principles and requirements" is morally unjustifiable. This requirement violates a basic principle of morality in employment relations --that an employer may justifiably impose discipline upon, or discharge, an employee only for unacceptable conduct on the job, or for conduct off the job that substantially impairs work performance. This principle expresses the appropriate balance between the employer's authority and the employee's freedom. The fact that the Vatican is a religious organization doesn't justify its employment policy requiring employees who do not occupy religious roles to conduct their lives in accordance with Catholic teachings. Nor does the fact that the Vatican is an independent State give it a right to dictate its view of appropriate conduct off the job to its lay employees. The principle that an organization has no such right applies both to private employers and to employers who are a part of an independent state.

Case from the February 3, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.