



THE CHURCH 1973 Fr. Andrew Greeley

The beginning of the letter made me suspicious: "As a fellow priest author . . . I'm wary of someone who tries to establish an intimacy with me in the first line of a letter by claiming some sort of common identity — especially when the identity is one I never use in my own self-definition (I am not a priest-author; just a priest).

I was even more wary because I couldn't remember ever having heard of the letter writer.

My wariness was well founded; it was a vile, patronizing, envious letter. It ended with a comment characteristic of such letters: "Everyone says you're resentful of criticism so you probably won't like this letter." I was willing to concede the point: I didn't like the letter one bit and, what's more, I am sure that no one who received a letter like it would have been pleased either. My only disagreement with the author was that what he had written was not criticism at all. It was a sick self-revelation of an angry and resentful man, a man who was totally unaware that there might be a distinction between his resentment and rational discourse.

Unfortunately, there is very little criticism in the American Church today. I define criticism as closely argued, intellectually disciplined analysis of another person's work which relentlessly seeks out the weaknesses in his assumptions, his reasoning, his evidence and his conclusions. Glance through the book review sections of the major Catholic journals, the editorials in the Catholic press, columns written by left-wingers such as Peter Steinfels or right-wingers like Paul Hallett (when they are sitting in judgment on others' work) and see how much that purports to be criticism really is. What one encounters in such sources (and particularly in book reviews) is self-display, anger, and envy.

If one happens to be familiar with the work of the man being "criticized" one frequently finds it very hard to recognize the man or his writing in what is being described. I remember being appalled at the first review of my first book (written by Dorothy Dohen in The Critic — or was it Books on Trial in those days?). It was not particularly hostile (though obviously the author was a bit displeased that she had not written the book), but it had almost nothing to do with what I had written. I've gotten used to the phenomenon since then and almost take it for granted.

It didn't take me long to discover that one rarely encounters criticism, only self-styled critics who are interested in displaying their own superiority. I found consolation in the thought that I wasn't being singled out for special treatment; every author who publishes much is accorded the same response, particularly by those who would like to write but don't or can't. I defy anyone to trace any connection between the popular reviews of the work of Eugene Kennedy or Raymond Brown and what these men have actually done.

Yet criticism is indispensable. I would not hire for the Center for the Study of American Pluralism a junior colleague who would not be committed to devastating critiques of early drafts of my work. I would not want a student in a seminar who would not strongly disagree with what is being said or done. I would not be pleased with an editor who would not go over my articles or my books with a fine tooth comb. I would not want to work with an associate who would not challenge every weakness in my methodology.

An uncritical colleague or associate or student or editor is unprofessional. Such people have the responsibility to criticize built into their professional roles. Not to criticize is irresponsible. Not to seek criticism is foolish. How else are you to improve your work? That there is so little criticism in the American church is most unfortunate.

But of course criticism is very difficult. To follow someone else's line of reasoning and engage in disciplined argumentation with him requires that one abandon envy, self-display, self-indulgence and force oneself to think clearly and precisely. Not many people like to do that. Indeed, sometimes I think that not many Catholics who engage in what purports to be intellectual discourse are able to think clearly or precisely — or even to think at all.

Pro-Lifers Picket CBS

New York (RNS) — Nearly 300 pro-life advocates from the New York City area demonstrated outside the offices of CBS-TV headquarters (Aug. 21) protesting the second of two controversial episodes of the "Maude" comedy show which treated the abortion issue.

One of a series of protests scheduled to take place in various parts of the country while the episode was being broadcast — the demonstration involved men, women and children, some with lighted candles and others with signs. They demanded CBS-TV give them equal time to present alternatives to abortion. Members of the Long Island Coalition for Life, who joined metropolitan area Right to Life groups, described the Maude episode as one-sided propaganda on an important issue of public controversy.

Charles Williamson, coalition president, stressed that pro-life advocates believe there is nothing to fear from an honest, fair and open presentation of the issues surrounding the abortion controversy. He said the Maude

shows, however, "bear the signs of an attempt to manipulate public moral standards by a contrived and selective presentation of a moral dilemma."

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