

Balancing: Between Puritanism and Porn (Or: "What PG Means")

By FATHER WILLIAM O'MALLEY, SJ

Thirteen years ago when I first began teaching at McQuaid, a group of Rochester men and women were attempting to set up a watchdog committee over the novels and plays read in Catholic high schools. They were rightly concerned over the growing proliferation of highly eroticized materials mushrooming in the dark corners of drug stores. Although compared with the brassy mutants it has spawned, Playboy now seems almost as tame as the old Esquire, these people clearly saw what was coming. Public morality was beginning to look like a man in his middle years: the telltale line of fat which, without Spartan self-discipline, would grow into an ugly paunch. Sadly, despite their efforts, it happened anyway.

My problem — then and now — was not with their laudable attempts to pressure erotica from the public bookstands. My problem was their refusal to look at sexually oriented material as a spectrum, ranging from innocent love through mildly stimulating material of no problem to a mature adult to openly dehumanizing material which treats human beings like copulating cattle. For them, the old moral adage *obsta principiis* (beware the beginnings) was not only unchallengeable but pushed to an extreme, where a good moral principle becomes inflexible and therefore evil itself. As a result, they wanted to ban from Catholic classrooms material which might trouble in the slightest way the most extremely sensitive student in class. I recall that when they came to McQuaid to elicit our cooperation, they wanted us to remove from our syllabus *The Good Earth*, *Catcher in the Rye*, any novel by Graham Greene or Ernest Hemingway. I was only mildly appalled to find that no one on the panel had read any one of the books they hoped we would interdict, nor was there a single high school or college English teacher in their group.

I am not mocking them. Their motives were unquestionable: to keep youngsters from entangling themselves in dehumanized filth. Unfortunately, they were so overcautious that they were trying to keep adolescents in child-likeness until their wedding nights. They had confused innocence with ignorance.

For a long time this had been standard practice in the Church, and at least in theory it had much to recommend it. We were rightfully afraid that young people would fall down a well, so we wisely built a hedge around it. But then, just to be sure, we built another hedge around that hedge. And then another around that. And on and on, until we were left with youngsters who believed that they had committed a mortal (i.e., deadly) sin if they'd lingered a bit too long over a National Geographic issue on Bali. Many, unhappily, said that if the man who looked longingly at a woman's picture got exactly the same punishment as the man who

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tomcatted around on an epic scale... well, you might as well hang for a sheep as for a lamb.

How things have changed! Now, more than a few Catholic parents have had to adjust to the fact that their children are living with people they are not married to. With the college children returning home with their Penthouses at Thanksgiving, one hesitates to risk the accusation of Puritanism by prohibiting them. ("Besides, there's lotsa good articles in them.") "Captains and Kings" displayed more flesh than most movies that were "condemned" in 1967. The drugstore racks routinely offer covers which, I confess, even hardy so-called liberals find pretty disgusting. ("If the customers don't find 'em here, they'll take their other business elsewhere, right?")

Like them or not, such are the facts. And yet I fear that many parents are acting as if they were not the milieu in which their children are actually living. Rather than try to prepare them for the battle, rather than try openly and forthrightly to ease their children toward a balanced awareness of sexuality, rather than help them understand why people act and speak coarsely, we too often prefer to pretend such realities are not real.

This well-intentioned attitude is clearly embodied in many parents' use of the PG movie rating. They have a hard-and-fast rule: no PG until college, or at least until age 18. Such a stance seems to imply that sexual maturity and the ability to handle coarseness turns on like a thermostat with the issuance of an adult driver's license or a wedding license. If there is a great deal of sexual laxity in good, young adults today, it is my conviction that it exists less because of parental permissiveness than because of well-intentioned parental strictness. We have given them answers about sexuality and coarseness but shielded them from the questions.

It would seem, at least to me, that a far wiser use of the PG rating (or the equivalent judgment about books and plays and magazines) would be: no PG unless we see it together and then go out for a hamburger and talk about it. We don't hesitate to share with children our own adolescent experience of hard work or financial stress or bad companions. Why is it so few adults are willing to share with young people long past puberty their own adolescent experience of sexual confusion?

This anomaly came home to roost once again on the chimneys of my mind when I decided that this Fall we would put on "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". People I really respect and who thus far had respected me began asking, with apprehensive smiles, "Ahem. You're not serious. High school kids putting on 'Cuckoo's Nest'? What do they know about that kind of people?"

given totally to God, emptied out, as when in offering sacrifice the priest took a cup of wine and poured it out on the ground. Paul had poured out his life like that serving God in his neighbor. When the time of his dissolution was near, and he had none to turn to, he turned to God. And God heard his prayers.

Paul knew God would, for Paul had been a Pharisee. He knew the Old Testament perhaps better than most men of his day. He knew Sirach (R1), and Sirach had written: "The Lord... knows no favorite... yet he hears the cry of the oppressed... especially of him who serves God willingly. The prayer of such a one pierces the cloud and reaches its goal."

Our blessed Lord, who always clarified what was written in the Old Testament and who always verified what His followers taught, illustrated these truths in the lovely parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (R3). Here both men pray; the publican's prayer is one of petition; the Pharisee's prayer is one of praise — but not of God, but of himself. Passion indeed blinds, especially the passion of conceit! The Pharisee with "unbowed head" prayed a litany of his deeds — "I do this, I do that... I, I, I!"

What a mentality — as though God's blessings were to be merited, as though grace were not an unmerited favor, as though good deeds were done to win God's favor (which we always enjoy, no matter what we do)! Rather we do good works, that seeing them, others may glorify our Father who makes people

good.

The poor publican was closer by far to God. For in his humility he saw what he was — and all men are — truly sinners. "Not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven," he beat his breast and said, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." "The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds."

Why do we pray? To praise God? Yes. Because we are so good? No! "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord."

At other times we pray to ask God for mercy. Because we deserve it? No! But because we are needy. We come, like the Pharisee, wholly taken up with ourselves, obstinate in our desires and half-crazed by our appetites. We need to be changed, not God. Because He loves us/He will change us — if we are humble enough to realize our need for change.

NEW SEASON

A three-part lecture and discussion series presented as "New Season" opens tomorrow night at St. Christopher's Center, 3350 Union St., North Chili. Sister Kathleen Kircher will talk about Healing to Divorced and Separated Catholics.

Death and Dying will be Father James Schwartz's topic Oct. 27, and Survival '77 — Living with the Younger Generation will be explored Nov. 3 by Dr. Dennis Boike. All sessions begin at 8 p.m. The parish education committee in-

My answer was nothing, that's why I want to do it, so they can learn that human life is more taxing than worrying about your acne or your crabgrass.

NEXT WEEK: More about the decision to stage "Cuckoo's Nest."

SOME THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER

By Ed Sulewski

Facing reality avoids denying it. Aside from the specific personal reasons for discussing funeral arrangements in advance of need, there is an additional benefit. The subject of death is brought out in the open and the family is afforded an opportunity to mutually share their thoughts about its important considerations. Mental health is never sustained by the denial of death, but by the frank acknowledgment of this reality of life.

Entering into a pre-arrangement agreement with a funeral director also provides an opportunity to indicate one's wishes in writing. It ought to be prefaced by a review and evaluation of current funeral costs, funeral ceremonies and alternate funeral and burial procedures. Thus counseling with a funeral director could well be a significant educational experience. For further information call me at 342-3400. #2

SCHAUMAN FUNERAL HOME, INC., 2100 St. Paul St.

Novena to St. Jude

Oct. 20-28 at St. Jude's Church, 4100 Lyell Road, Gates, with Mass and prayers each evening at 7:30 Father John J. Steger, pastor, invites everyone to come and pray to the Patron of Hopeless Cases and Impossible Causes, or to write to him for a booklet.

Conducting the Novena: Father William J. McGavin, OFM, Director of the Franciscan Mission Band, Holy Name Province.

Chief Celebrant of the Solemn Closing Mass on the Feast of St. Jude, Oct. 28: Bishop Dennis W. Hickey.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 18:9-14. (R1) Sir. 35:12-14. (R2) 2 TM. 4:6-8, 16-18.

The theme of Sunday's readings is not just prayer, but that quality of prayer that reaches the heart of God, namely humble prayer. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor" (the humble).

Prayer can be divided into two kinds: the prayer of thankful praise and the prayer of petition. We might interpret Paul's prayer in the second reading as a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. "The Lord stood by my side and gave me strength," wrote Paul. "The Lord will continue to rescue me from all attempts to do me harm. To Him be glory for ever and ever." (R2).

Paul's prayer of praise was undoubtedly preceded by a prayer of petition. Paul was in prison. He was on trial for his life. Fairweather friends had abandoned him. He was alone and lonely. As always, he turned to the Lord. As always, the Lord stood by him when all others would not. As always, Paul did not forget to thank God.

God answered Paul's prayer because of his humility. His life had been poured out like a libation:

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