

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



Martin Marty, church historian at the University of Chicago and one of the nation's most respected observers of the religious scene, has invented a new sociological category: the "By God, at least they really believe in something" syndrome.

It is a phrase, he says, that comes regularly from the lips and pens of secular and faintheartedly liberal commentators. They use it to show that they recognize spiritual machismo when they see it.

Three times in recent years, admirers of the "really-believers" have lined up in awe of really belief.

The first time was when the counter-culture produced New Religions. Children of the best and the brightest were running off from college to commune, from permissive homes to "totalitarian" families.

When parents and other relatives grieved, they were silenced by the "By God, at least they really believe in something" syndromologists.

The charge, usually implicit but sometimes even explicit, was that Catholics and mainstream Protestants no longer had any courage or conviction, so the "kids" had no place to go but to authority and absolutism.

Jonestown and what Marty calls the Bagwhamrashneeshbashnash took some of the wind out of those sails.

The second round came with the arrival of fundamentalists. Not the Billy Graham-type of evangelical Protestant, but the ones who really believe — enough to cut off American citizenship from those who don't, enough to run the Wizard of Oz and tidal waves and Cinderella out of the classroom.

Any criticism of these folks is met with the same, "By God, at least they really believe in something."

The third round came with the censure of Father Charles Curran and the disciplining of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen.

"In the midst of half-believing, half-compromising communities of American

bishops and theologians anywhere," some non-Catholic commentators have argued against fellow non-Catholics, "you should yield your brain and shut your mouth to share admiration."

Of the Vatican defenders it is said, "By God, at least they really believe in something."

Marty, a Lutheran, questions the credentials of these other non-Catholics who seek to silence Vatican critics with the "By God, at least . . ." syndrome.

Why? First, because it is possible that those under attack may be right.

"If anyone needs confidence on this front," historian Marty writes, "please phone your friendly neighborhood church historian."

"Church history is the art and science of recording the revisions that later ages make of past follies by popes, curias, commissions, councils, really-believers and the like. Vatican administrators even correct their predecessors."

Secondly, the "By God . . ." syndromatists misapply the dogma of papal infallibility.

Not everything the pope says is infallible. More to the point, most popes, including this one, have never said anything at all that was infallible.

Infallibility is a negative charism, or gift of the Holy Spirit, which protects the Church from fundamental error, but only under very limited and precisely defined circumstances.

The pope must be speaking as earthly head of the Church (*ex cathedra*), on a matter of faith and morals, with the clear intention of binding the whole Church.

"It is possible, then, is it not," Marty concludes, "to admire people whose faith is not borne or sustained only under the crack of the whip, who believe in the midst of unbelief, who believe singularly in Christ in a pluralist world, who struggle with soul and express their faith catholically?"

For those who prefer Martin Marty straight, see his "M.E.M.O." columns in *The Christian Century*, the issues of November 26 and December 3.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



The Christmas stamp

Most people would be surprised that the first postal stamp issued from Washington, D.C., to give even a light nod to the festival of Christmas was not printed until 1962, about 200 years after the establishment of the U.S. Postal Service. For the next four years, the Christmas issues depicted *only* such secular aspects of the holiday as "Wreath and Candles" and "National Christmas Tree."

In 1966, Hans Memling's masterpiece, "Madonna and Child," was issued, giving a tinge of devotion to the event. But only twice was the Bethlehem scene issued. The first was Giorgione's "Adoration of the Shepherds" in 1971. The second was Copley's "Nativity" in 1976; both were beautiful and appropriate.

All other issues of the religious stamp have been lovely versions of the Madonna with Child, but in each the Holy Family had long left Bethlehem and the Christ Child was well beyond the weaning stage. To express a hope for thoughtful consideration of the Christmas stamp, which grows more popular each year, consider the following letter.

Postmaster General
Headquarters: U.S. Postal Service
Washington, D.C. 20260

Dear Sir:

In my work as a cleric, a part of my apostolate is a wide correspondence. Consequently I make much use of the postal system, and have been pleased with the promptness of delivery, with the courtesy and efficiency of the clerks at the postal windows, and with the letter carriers. But I have a twofold problem: firstly, the lackluster appearance of so many of our stamps, and, secondly, the religious Christmas stamp.

In my work I receive mail primarily

from Africa and Europe, and often admire the beauty of the stamps issued in this part of the world. A local postmistress told me the most beautiful stamps come from Australia. Then I study our American stamps, and wonder why so many are dull to the eye. In 1982, you issued a set of stamps depicting the native bird and flower of each of the 50 states. Could you not continue such attractive stamps?

And now, regarding the religious Christmas stamps: they are always good artistically, but I am puzzled that only twice has the picture of the Bethlehem event been depicted, in 1971 and 1976. The Madonna and Child stamps, used nearly every year since 1967, are aesthetically pleasing, but the Christmas event commemorated by these stamps has little to do with Bethlehem. In the Madonna and Child stamp, the Holy Family had long departed Bethlehem, and the infant had been weaned for some time. The '71 and '76 stamps were Giorgione's "Adoration of the Shepherds" and Copley's "Nativity," both beautiful, historical and appropriate.

As I write this, December 29, the Jews are celebrating an important event in world history by observing the feast of Hanukkah, which I think could also be rightly commemorated with a beautiful stamp.

In summary:

- 1) I am pleased with the delivery service of the U.S. Postal Service.
- 2) I am requesting that you engage artists who can design stamps with more color and beauty.
- 3) I hope that next year you will not give us a dinky little Christmas stamp. Why such a miniature to depict the historic event of the birth of Christ?

Sincerely yours,

The Rev. Paul J. Cuddy

Father Thomas O'Keefe, 53, dies; pastor of Sacred Heart, Auburn, and St. Ann's, Owasco

Father Thomas J. O'Keefe, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, Auburn, and St. Ann's Church, Owasco, died suddenly in Auburn on December 30, 1986. Although in poor health for several months, Father O'Keefe conducted a rigorous, inspired Christmas program and observed an intensive weekend schedule two days later.

Father O'Keefe was born in Palmyra on

April 1, 1933, the son of the late James T. O'Keefe and Mary McGuire. Following his preparation at St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries, Father O'Keefe was ordained to the priesthood at Sacred Heart Cathedral on June 5, 1958. He served successfully as assistant pastor at St. Mary's, Dansville; St. Joseph's, Penfield; St. Francis de Sales, Geneva; St. James and Holy Rosary, Rochester. He had been pastor of

Sacred Heart and St. Ann's since June 30, 1982.

Father O'Keefe was a very talented and humble person. His preaching and teaching were particularly effective at every level, benefiting everyone from small children to senior citizens. Despite such success, he remained modest and unassuming, always attributing his effectiveness to the grace of God. Father O'Keefe's openness brought

people close to him, resulting in strong, faith-filled communities at both Sacred Heart and St. Ann's.

A Mass of Christian Burial was offered on January 2 at Sacred Heart, Auburn, with Bishop Matthew H. Clark as principal concelebrant and Father Paul Brennan, homilist. Interment was in St. Mary's Cemetery, Palmyra.

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