

Father Richard P. McBrien

## Essays in Theology



### Holding the center

In a theological essay written three years before his election to the papacy, Pope John Paul II spoke of the two sides of the Church's life: "The Church possesses a special interiority and a specific openness."

Martin E. Marty, professor of Church history at the University of Chicago, picked up on this sentence in his own insightful book, *The Public Church* (Crossroad, 1981).

The Church's special interiority, Marty noted, comes from its focus on Jesus Christ and the faith its members hold in common. This allows them communion with God and each other, and at the same time establishes a language of witness and worship.

By itself, however, interiority could lead to introversion. The Church would become "a company of people huddled together with their backs to the world." But the Church has also been gifted with a specific openness. This means that its ties with the world are "mediated, focused and disciplined."

The church," Marty insisted, "does not merely sprawl and spill itself until all its substance is gone. The relations to the world are selective; this church 'picks its shots.'"

By itself, of course, openness could lead to a loss of identity. The Church would become a company of people always on the move, but with no permanent home base.

I was reminded of this necessary balance between interiority and openness while reading a recent *Newsweek* report (December 22) on the decline of the mainline Protestant churches in the United States.

"Decline" may be too weak a word. On the other hand, "collapse" may be too strong. But let the facts speak for themselves.

In 1920, the seven mainline denominations (Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Baptists, Lutherans, and United Church of Christ) accounted for 76 percent of American Protestants. Today they have barely half. Since the mid-1960s, the mainliners have collectively lost almost five million members.

There are more Mormons and more Muslims in the United States now than there are Episcopalians, and there are as many Pentecostals as there are Presbyterians. Methodists are losing their faithful at a rate of 1,000 a week and are now two million fewer than they were in 1965. Northern Presbyterians have lost nearly a third of their 3.3 million members over the last two decades.

The Disciples of Christ (officially known as the Christian Church) have suffered most. They've lost 40 percent of their members and now claim just over one million adherents. Only the American Baptists have shown a net increase; from 78,000 to 1.6 million.

The *Newsweek* report does not place all the blame at the mainliners' doorsteps.

First of all, there's been a dramatic population shift in the United States. Historically, mainline Protestantism has been strongest in the Northeast, the Middle West, and the prairie states — all of which have lost population to the Sun Belt, where there are relatively few Protestant churches to join that are not conservatively evangelical.

Secondly, mainliners are disproportionately suburban and small-town folk in "a nation of sprawling urbanization." And thirdly, the mainliners are overwhelmingly white and middle class, at a time when Hispanics, Asians and other minorities are providing U.S. Christianity with most of its converts.

Fourthly, mainline Protestants are having fewer children. The Presbyterians, for example, have a birthrate of only 1.97, which is well below the replacement level. *Newsweek's* writers wonder if the Presbyterians are destined to vanish like the Shakers.

Finally, the mainline churches are having a hard time getting the children they do produce to stay in the fold. The majority of mainline baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1962) have drifted away from organized religion. They are the kind of religious individualists whom Robert Bellah and his associates have written about in their celebrated book, *Habits of the Heart* (University of California, 1985).

But sociologists are not willing to let the mainliners off the hook completely. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, for example, find these churches suffering from "a lack of cohesion, too much openness and diffuseness and absence of any clear sense of institutional identity." They have failed to balance a commendable concern for social causes (world peace, minority rights, etc.) with a serious commitment to theological exploration and the cultivation of authentically Christian spiritualities.

The temptation, of course, is to slam on the brakes, toss the spirit of openness out the window and make a sharp right turn toward introverted interiority. The mainliners aren't likely to do that, although some of them would favor that course.

Significantly, there are Catholics who offer the same prescription for their own Church. They're wrong.

What is needed is balance — a balance between openness and interiority, just as Pope John Paul II once proposed. For that, the Catholic Church — indeed, any church — needs a healthy and vigorous center.

At the moment, however, some Catholic leaders are, inexplicably, tearing away at that center rather than nurturing it.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

## On the Right Side



### Confused Bible fanatics

Bernard Quinn, a parishioner, handed me a three-page leaflet attacking the Catholic Church. "This was on the windshield of my car when I came out of Kearney High's basketball game," he told me. "There was one on every windshield in the lot. It's disgusting."

The flyer was a collection of "Questions to Ask Your Priest," with the usual old saws. "Where in the Bible do we find to pray to the Virgin Mary? That Peter was in Rome? That there is a purgatory? That we should not eat meat on Friday?" Evidently whoever produced the flyer still doesn't know that the abstinence law was abrogated years ago.

The flyer calls to mind an old saying: "One fool can ask questions that would keep a thousand wise men busy answering." It also reminded me of a booklet published by Hadelman-Julius Company more than 60 years ago, entitled "A Thousand Contradictions in the Bible."

The Catholic Church teaches that there are no contradictions in the Bible as it came from the authors. But it is easy to juxtapose biblical quotations out of context, which leads to an apparent contradiction. St. Matthew records of the crucifixion, for example, that both thieves taunted our Lord. (Matthew 27:39). St. Luke records that one taunted the Lord, while the other repented, pleading, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." (Luke 23:39).

Juxtaposed out of context, the two quotations seem contradictory. But St. Augustine observed centuries ago that, obviously, both thieves began taunting, but only Dismas repented.

The purpose of the "Thousand Contradictions" booklet was to unsettle the faith that believing Christians have in the Bible. The purpose of the insidious parking-lot flyer is to unsettle the faith of Catholics.

How foolish it would be to take a class of medical students, give them a complex set of medical books and say, "Go to it, class. Whatever you come up with, that's the correct diagnosis and the correct medical procedure."

Likewise, how foolish it is to believe that God gave us the very complex set of books known as the Bible, but gave us no teacher to interpret the book.

Did you know that the four words "This is my body" have more than 50 interpretations? In so vital a doctrine,

has God left us uncertain? Certainly not. He gave us the Catholic Church and the guarantee that he would be with it until the end of the world. And God is faithful to His word.

Bible fanatics seem incapable of comprehending the reason that hundreds of contending non-Catholic Christian sects exist — because each claims to be inspired by the Spirit. If the Jehovah's Witnesses, which came into being in 1847, are God's messengers, what of the Pentecostals, the Bible Baptists, the Adventists, and hundreds of other non-Catholic denominations? The Catholic Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It gives cohesiveness, unity and certainty in faith.

In 1955, I was chaplain at Nouasseur Air Depot near Casablanca, Morocco. One day, a 22-year-old, curly-haired, intelligent Bob White came to the office. "I want to take instructions to be a Catholic," he said. When I asked him why, he replied, "Because while I was at services last week, it dawned on me that the preacher was a Baptist, and the men were Pentecostals, Methodists and many denominations. But the one Church that historically goes back to Christ is the Catholic Church."

"Your history is correct," I affirmed. I gave him intensive instructions. Later, he personally instructed a master sergeant in his squadron, and was his godfather in baptism at our Easter Vigil Mass. When he returned home, he brought his fiancée, brother and sister-in-law into the Church. And to my pleasure, he named his first son Paul.

The three-page pamphlet Bernard Quinn found on his windshield might disturb the weak of faith or those uneducated in the faith. The pamphlet ends up with the pious declaration: "Our prayer is that you (Catholics) will realize your lost condition, that you are on the way to hell."

And Jimmy Swaggart, who hauls in millions of dollars preaching his special brand of televised Bible interpretation, confidently writes: "The Catholic organization is not a Christian organization. Whosoever follows its errant doctrines will be deceived and end up eternally lost."

I suppose the one consolation we Catholics will have in hell is that we'll have lots of company. Imagine the arrogance of these preachers!

## Education

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resting, challenging, new, and very, very relaxed and caring."

Restrictions accompanying its state funding enable Stresswatch to serve only clients with certain disabilities, the foremost among them being cerebral palsy, mental retardation, epilepsy, learning disabilities and autism. But because many of the people who come to the Action Center have multiple handicaps, Anderson encounters a wide range of other disabilities as well.

Certain problems appear to be cyclical, recurring during the same season each year, he noted. January and February seem to be the time of year when disabled people are most often evicted or involved in family disputes. They also struggle more than in other seasons with transportation and adequate heat.

In most cases, Anderson's aim is to extricate disabled people from their immediate crises, and then teach them how to manage on their own the next time.

That requires tremendous reserves of patience and perseverance. Anderson spent weeks teaching the client with the cat about personal grooming and housekeeping. Although he made great progress in those areas, the client flatly refused to empty his pet's litterbox. Eventually, he was forced to give up the cat. Now, because he has refused to follow the landlord's other rules, the client is being evicted from his apartment.

"That case might seem like a failure, but it

really isn't," Anderson said. "The man's grooming is 100 percent better, and that's something that will stay with him for the rest of his life. He's also out doing things for himself, whereas a year ago he would've just given up."

"We will continue to support him as long as we see him making an effort," he added.

Despite Anderson's long hours and personal attention, the difference between painstaking progress and unqualified success usually depends on the client.

With undisguised relish, Anderson described one woman who came to him months ago with budgeting problems. "She didn't understand that there was such a thing as a negative balance," he recalled.

This month, she not only recognized a bank error in her statement, but made an appointment at the bank, arranged for transportation, and returned home — all on her own.

"You can give all the support, love and care necessary, but the final bottom line is that they have to try to live up to responsibility," Anderson said. "All I really do is offer understanding and a listening ear."

### Secular Franciscans to meet at Aquinas Institute soon

A meeting of the St. Patrick's Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order has been scheduled for the Aquinas Institute, 1127 Dewey Ave., Rochester, on Sunday, February 15.

Novice instruction will take place at 1:15 p.m., with recitation of the rosary at 1:30 p.m. and Mass at 2 p.m.

All are welcome to attend.

THERE'S IS ENOUGH TO RESTORE ONE'S FAITH IN THE POWER OF MOVIES. ONE OF THE YEAR'S TEN BEST.

BEAUTIFUL SCENES HAVE SUCH VISUAL CLARITY THEY APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN LIGHTED BY BOOTS OF LIGHTNING.

**LITTLE**

*Therese*

7:30 P.M. & 9:30 P.M. Nightly  
Matinees Saturday & Sunday 2:00 P.M. & 4:00 P.M. (subtitled)  
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