

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## The Jesus of history

Father John Meier's *Jesus Among the Historians* (The New York Times Book Review, December 21, 1986) is one of the most important theological articles to appear in the popular press in a very long time.

Father Meier, a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, is on the faculty at The Catholic University of America and is the general editor of the prestigious Catholic Biblical Quarterly. His scholarly and sacerdotal credentials are, as they say, impeccable.

His New York Times essay shares with a much wider audience the results of recent biblical scholarship on the question of the historical Jesus. For anyone already familiar with modern biblical studies, Father Meier's article provides a fine review of the material.

For intellectually curious and open-minded readers, his piece conveys something of the excitement of recent biblical investigations. But for more traditional Catholics, the article would have to be disturbing.

Such Catholics believe, for example, that when the Holy Father and his curial officials place restrictions on scholars, it is always in the service of truth.

Father Meier reminds us, however, that some of the books used in seminary and college classrooms before Vatican II were composed by "exegetical acrobats," people who "desperately sought to harmonize the discordant testimony of the four Gospels." These textbooks weren't the product of ignorance. "Many of their authors knew better," Father Meier writes, "but they were subject to censorship and silencing by the Vatican."

History has shown that it was the Vatican officials, not the scholars, who were wrong. Indeed, the Church later embraced some of the very positions for which biblical scholars earlier in this century had been condemned.

Father Meier's article also implies that Jesus could, and apparently did, make mistakes, contrary to the traditional Catholic's assumption that, because He was God, He knew everything there was to know, from the first moment of His conception in Mary's womb.

"By accepting John's baptism," Father Meier notes, "Jesus indicated He accepted John's message of the imminent disaster that John thought was threatening Israel in the last days of its history."

But, of course, John was wrong about that. The world did not come to an end — not in John's lifetime, not in Jesus' lifetime, and, so far, not even in our own.

The item that traditional Catholics would find most disturbing in Father

Meier's essay has to do with Jesus' "founding" of the Church. Traditional Catholics generally assume that Jesus did indeed "found" a church, complete with pope, bishops, priests, sacraments, doctrines and rules, that He left us, in fact, an ecclesiastical blueprint by which we are to be guided until the end of time.

"Seeing Himself as the final prophet sent to a sinful nation in its last hour," Father Meier writes, "He aimed to gather the scattered people of God back into one, holy community. In this sense, Jesus could not have intended to found a church, because He found a church already existing — the *gahal*, the *eda*, the *knesset* that Yahweh had once called together in the wilderness and was now calling together again."

But what about the Twelve Apostles? the traditional Catholic might retort. Didn't Jesus call them and make them the foundation of His Church?

"The choice of the Twelve makes clear," Father Meier observes, "that Jesus did not intend to found a new sect separated from Israel." If He had, He would have named only 11 and included Himself among the Twelve, as a symbol of a restored Israel. Instead, He named 12, indicating that "He saw Himself standing over against and above the nucleus He was creating."

Father Meier turns next to the various titles that the New Testament attributes to Jesus: Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord. Jesus didn't necessarily understand and use these titles in the same way our preachers and catechists have often understood and used them.

"The ringing affirmations by Jesus that He was indeed 'the Messiah,' 'Son of God,' and 'Son of Man' look like a Christological catechism drawn up by later Christians," Father Meier reports.

Finally, traditional Catholics believe that the resurrection was so objectively real an event that it could have been captured on film, had the technology been available at the time and had someone been near enough to the tomb when Jesus came forth.

Father Meier points out that the resurrection, although "real," was "not an ordinary event of our time and space, verifiable in principle by believer and nonbeliever alike." In other words, without faith, you couldn't have seen the risen Lord, even if you had been there on that first Easter Sunday.

Some theologians have gotten into trouble for writing things like that, but biblical scholars seem to have developed an immunity to reprisal. Indeed even conservative prelates are known to applaud their work.

Alas, perhaps Emerson was right: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds..."

Meanwhile, the liturgy office staff plans to evaluate its own evaluation program. Because of the time and effort it requires, the program has only been offered to two or three parishes each year since it was established nearly eight years ago.

"It certainly is beneficial, but it does take a lot of time," Kubiniec said. "We need to review it and take a look at how it might be revised or updated. Right now, it's something we do as we can."

## Liturgy

Continued from Page 6

committee plans to do at its next meeting. Overall, members were pleased with the report.

"There were a lot of things we forgot and a lot more we just didn't know," Gloria Treis remarked.

### 'Home with a Heart' completed for Rochester families in need

"The Home with a Heart," constructed by Rochester/Flower City Habitat for Humanity, has been completed. The duplex, located at 150-156 Central Park in Rochester, will be occupied this month by the families of Francisco Teron and Caretha Pressley.

### Nazareth Academy receives gift from Rochester business group

Nazareth Academy has received a \$600 gift to the school's endowment fund from the Italian American Business Men's Association.

This is the second gift that has been made to Nazareth Academy in the past two years.

Sister Carol Cimino, the school's director of development, will make a presentation this spring to the association on the activities and purposes of the Nazareth endowment.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## What keeps Greene going?

In 1983, Father Robert MacNamara of Corning alerted me to a new book by Graham Greene, *Monsignor Quixote*, written somewhat in the style of the Italian *Don Camillo*.

When Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, both top-notch English novelists, became Catholics five decades ago, many wondered if their new-found faith would filter into their novels. It did. Millions who saw the mini-series of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* will remember the heart-rending visit to the Brideshead chapel, empty of the Blessed Sacrament "like the desolation of the Good Friday liturgy."

Greene and Waugh shared the suffering of so many intelligent and cultured Catholics who witnessed the replacement of the awesome liturgies of past centuries by lesser rites, and agonized over inept translations of Mass prayers and Bible translations. Both writers were especially troubled by the minimization of the Eucharist, both as Mass and as Sacrament.

Around 1933, Greene went to Mexico as a journalist and experienced the deadly persecution of the Church by the Mexican government: all properties expropriated, the religious habit forbidden, churches closed, priests hunted down and even executed.

In 1940, Greene wrote what some consider his greatest book: *The Power and the Glory*. (The U.S. title is *The Labyrinthine Way*.) The novel depicts the persecution in Mexico and the fidelity of a single priest who remained in his state, haunted and hunted by the police.

The priest was terrified by his pursuit. He wanted to run away to safety, but he remained. Why? So the people could have Mass and the sacraments. He was finally captured, imprisoned and shot to death. As the shots were fired, a knock came at the door of a Mexican home: another priest had arrived to secretly give Mass to the people.

This book was made into a 1947 movie starring Henry Fonda as the priest. Irish-born director John Ford considered *The Fugitive* his finest film.

The January issue of Cultural Information Service listed an upcoming TV version of Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*, with Alec Guinness and Leo McKern playing the leads. Set in Spain, the book tells the story of a simple priest who becomes a monsignor, and the ire of Father Quixote's bishop and the bishop's secretary, both portrayed in darksome strokes. Monsignor Quixote's friend, Sancho, the local communist mayor, has just been defeated for election in the tiny Spanish village.

Monsignor Quixote and the communist Sancho set out together on an indefinite journey. Each chapter unfolds events that combine humor, ribaldry, wisdom and humanity. I wonder how the TV will treat depictions of the bawdy-house, the sleazy movie, the episcopal meanness. But with Alec Guinness as the lead actor, the showing should prove scintillating.

The most moving chapter is the last, when the naive Monsignor, suspended by his bishop, celebrates a "dry Mass" in a Trappist monastery in the rapid presence of Sancho, a visiting professor Pilbeam and Trappist Father Leopold. We read:

"The Mayor took another step forward, ready to catch him, but then Monsignor Quixote spoke again: 'Corpus Domini nostri.' With no hesitation he took the invisible paten and the invisible Host, and his fingers laid the nothing on his tongue. Then he raised the invisible chalice and seemed to drink from it. The Mayor could see the movement of his throat as he swallowed."

This scene dramatically affirms Graham Greene's love and reverence for Christ in the Eucharist, both Mass and Sacrament.

### Pre-school awareness program set for Rochester-area facility

A pre-school awareness program for parents will take place at Apple-A-Daycare, 671 Panorama Trail West, Penfield on Saturday, February 28. Sessions are scheduled for 9 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and noon.

The purpose of the awareness day is to make current and future parents aware of the areas that should be considered when selecting child care for their children. The program will discuss state licensing requirements, demonstrate necessary facility features, and provide hand-out materials and checklists to use when evaluating a child care program. Information will also be presented on selection and evaluation of in-home child care programs. Presentations will be made by experienced child care professionals including scheduled talks by State Representatives,

pediatricians, nutritionists and day care providers.

In addition to the formal presentation sessions, attendees will be able to tour a day care, and meet with various individuals and companies who will be displaying child care related products and services.

For information about this free program, contact Jayne Andrews at (716)586-3940.

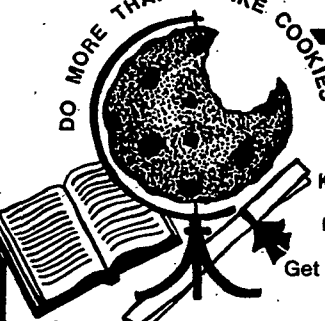
### Charity card party planned

The St. John Neumann Columbiettes Council #8271 of Penfield is sponsoring a charity card party on Saturday, February 28, at 8 p.m. The party will be held at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Building on 1040 Jackson Road, Webster.

The Columbiettes are a group of Catholic women 19 and older, who work side by side with the St. John Neumann Knights of Columbus to promote unity, fraternity and patriotism.

For information call (716)671-2236, 671-6047 or 377-2824.

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