

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



The Marian year

Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles was asked recently by the editors of Christianity Today, an evangelical Protestant magazine, if he thought Christian faith requires "special esteem for Mary?"

"A matter of devotion can't really be legislated," he replied. "Catholic individuals are very free. It is their decision whether or not they pray to the saints at all, or to which saints they will pray. So I can imagine a Christianity that did not particularly cultivate devotion to Mary. It could be in its way very authentic."

"Praying to Mary," he continued, "is a particular form of devotion that we think is pleasing to God, but it is not necessary. Provided that one did not reject devotion to Mary and the saints as idolatrous, we could accept a Christianity that practiced a different, purely theocentric or Christocentric form of piety."

Out of context, Father Dulles' answer might strike some Catholics as "offensive to pious ears" (to use an old expression).

The context of the interview, however, was ecumenical. Father Dulles was in dialogue with fellow Christians who try to measure everything against the standard of explicit biblical testimony. What is not directly authorized or recommended in the Bible is either unnecessary or contrary to the will of God, according to this interpretation. But Marian devotion, at least in some of its Catholic forms, is without explicit scriptural warrant.

Therefore, "pious ears" notwithstanding, Father Dulles' answer was correct. An authentic Christianity is conceivable without a Marian devotional component. As a matter of fact, many committed and saintly Protestant Christians do live their faith without any Marian dimension whatever. And, if the truth be told, many committed and saintly Catholics get by without it, too.

This is not to say that Marian devotion is irrelevant, or worse. In the course of centuries, it has taken root in the liturgical and personal prayer-life of millions of Catholics and Orthodox Christians, as well as of many thousands of Anglicans and Protestants.

The Second Vatican Council called Mary a model of the Church, an "excellent exemplar in faith and charity."

Cultural factors, however, seem to be as important as theological ones in the cultivation of Marian piety. Some ethnic groups, for historical reasons too complicated to sort out here, take to Marian piety much more readily than others.

Are these communities any more

"Catholic" than those for whom Marian devotion falls somewhat lower on the liturgical scale? Not necessarily.

These reflections are prompted this week by Pope John Paul II's recent announcement of a Marian year, beginning on Pentecost Sunday, June 7, and ending on the feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1988.

The pope looks upon the Marian year as a means of preparing for the coming of the third millennium of the Christian era. Taking Mary's example of faith and docility, the Church, he said, can renew its own "commitment of conformity to the will of God."

Just as Father Avery Dulles' remarks have to be taken in their fuller ecumenical context, so, too, must Pope John Paul II's. His teaching on Mary cannot be isolated from the teaching of his predecessors.

In two Marian encyclicals, Pope Pius XII strongly emphasized the social aspects of Marian devotion, citing Mary's own *Magnificat* prayer, replete with references to bread for the hungry, the downfall of the rich and powerful, and the uplifting of the poor.

Pope Paul VI returned to these themes in his 7,000-word apostolic exhortation, "Marian Devotion," in which he pointedly criticized some popular forms of Marian piety. He identified certain discrepancies between "the picture of the Blessed Virgin presented in a certain type of devotional literature" and "the way women live today." Noting with approval the gains women have made in achieving equality and co-responsibility not only in the family but also in society at large, Paul VI called upon the bishops to help close the gap between sentimental and mature piety.

Mary, he said, was not "a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others." Rather, she was "a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed and removes the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions."

Some politically conservative Catholics, especially in Latin America, are happy when the pope focuses attention on Mary because, in their minds at least, it means diverting our attention from the Church's demanding and challenging social teachings.

Whether in Latin America or in North America, let those who want to exalt Mary re-read the *Magnificat*. One hopes that Pope John Paul II, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, will make that a centerpiece of the Marian year.

Evening prayer for women set for Mercy Prayer Center

Women interested in deepening their knowledge of the call to religious life are invited to the Mercy Prayer Center, 65 Highland Ave., Rochester. The evening of prayer and reflection is slated for Monday, March 2, from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

The program will be led by Sister Rita Kaufman, RSM, a staff member at the center.

This evening is part of the year-long Faith

Sharing Program, planned by the congregation's Vocation Team, which provides an introduction to the spirit of religious life and to the Sisters of Mercy congregation.

To register for the evening or for additional information, contact Sister Sheila Stevenson in the Rochester area at (716)244-2175; Sister Marie Catherine Cain in the Corning, Elmira and Ithaca area at (607)732-6295; and Sister Pat Prinzing in the Hornell area at (607)324-0833.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



Television critique

Television is the number one teacher, educator, entertainer and time-consumer. Here are a few subjective evaluations with which many may not agree.

MacNeil-Lehrer: This program is probably the best reporting of news and commentary on TV, and in some depth, in contrast with the 6:30 nightly news from ABC, CBS and NBC.

Phil Donahue: An active enemy of the Catholic Church. He manipulates programs in such a way that viewers are poisoned against the Church, the hierarchy and Christian morality. For example, a program last year had two aggressive Catholic sisters, trouncing the pope and the Vatican, the male curia and the male priesthood. One, the belligerent Sister Traxler who, like Father Curran, has a penchant for getting on TV programs, was touting the book *Sexual Ethics*, which had been condemned by the Holy See. Donahue gave these women full reign to inveigh against the Church.

Two weeks later, seemingly to balance the feminist sisters, Donahue had on two Dominican nuns, the kind we used to hold in reverence and esteem. They wore the attractive Dominican religious habit. They were intelligent, articulate and knowledgeable, with that feminine graciousness, beautifully exemplified by the late Sister Madaleva, which made our sisters so admired. All through the program, Donahue badgered them, interrupting them constantly to block them from expressing their reasons for disagreeing with his fulminations. It was a dishonest act.

Some years ago, Donahue had Father William Smith, professor of moral theology at Dunwoodie Seminary, Yonkers, N.Y. on a program. Father Smith had studied under Father Curran at Catholic University, and thoroughly disagrees with him on his acceptance, albeit limited, of homosexuality, pre-

marital sex, divorce, etc. Father Smith so thoroughly backed Donahue against the wall that he could never get an invitation to return. Seminarian Robert Hilfiker of Holy Trinity Parish, Webster, a student at Dunwoodie, is to be ordained for the diocese of New York June 27. He told me that Father Smith is the finest teacher he has ever had.

Dr. Ruth: Gives appalling nightly presentations of immoral sex. One night I watched her discussing with some dozen teenaged boys and girls when, when not, how and why to have sex. Morality was not a consideration. On February 8, *60 Minutes* had a 20-minute segment, avowedly about AIDS, but clearly a pitch for condoms. Again, purity, chastity, self-control and reverence for bodies were considered non-entities.

Documentaries: *Animal Kingdom* and other animal features always intrigue me. Many World War II documentaries keep me alert about the horrors of war anywhere. Sometimes there is a special documentary that passes without much notice — for example, the 90-minute PBS documentary on Mother Teresa and her sisters on January 14, which went unnoticed by many because of weak advertising. And I was heartsick to find out from Father Raymond Heisel that Graham Greene's "Monsignor Quixote" played for two hours February 15, to the delight of Monsignor Quinn and Father Robert McNamara, and was unknown to most of us. Let's hope for a rerun.

I wonder if there could not be a diocesan bulletin board (not another department) to alert our people of coming attractions on television, on radio, and in moving pictures. It is heartening to know that *The Cosby Show* has been the highest in the Nielsen ratings. This family-oriented show reaches an estimated 36 million homes. Wouldn't our bishops love such a congregation!

Dentist

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"He treats everyone who comes in with respect."

Since he works alone and for limited periods of time, however, Dulski can offer only the most basic care to a relatively small number of patients. During the course of his biweekly visits, he sees an average of three patients in just over two hours. There are usually at least 15 additional names on a waiting list for appointments.

His regular practice, meanwhile, remains his first priority. "I'm making the biggest impact on the greatest number of people there, by being the best dentist I possibly can," he explained. "You know you can't meet all the needs (at Corpus Christi). You're just trying to let people know in some tangential way that you care for them. A genuine show of concern — that's really the message the center provides to people."

Dulski views liability as the biggest drawback to his work at the health center. "The risk is there, and that has bothered me more than anything else," he said. "I decided to take the risk, but that decision has to continually be evaluated."

The combination of risk and sacrifice to his practice and his family have meant that, for Dulski, leaving one office for another every two weeks remains a struggle.

"There's always something else I could be doing on that Tuesday morning," he said. "But that's a good thing, because struggle is growth."

Annual Polish Holiday planned

The Webster Knights of Columbus are hosting their annual Polish Holiday on Saturday, March 7, at the Webster Columbus Center on Barrett Drive in Webster.

The gala will feature Polish food and music by Ray Serafin.

For tickets, please call (716)671-3682, 467-0179, or 621-5110.

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