

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## New questions, old answers

There are Catholics still nostalgic for the pre-Vatican II Church, one of whose features was the question-box approach to doctrine and the moral life. Father Smith instructed Jackson through the Q & A method. And Father Conway, using the same form, answered every conceivable challenge to the faith.

Today's nostalgic Catholic complains about all the new answers being given to all the old questions. Sin has gone out the window.

This week's column is dedicated to such Catholics. What is offered below are old-style answers — but to current questions. And sin is given its due.

**Q.** Is it a sin to smoke?

**A.** Objectively, yes. It is always sinful to place your health at risk for no proportionately grave reason. It is even more seriously sinful to place another's health at risk. A pregnant woman does that to her unborn child. Parents do that to their growing children. An office worker or restaurant patron does that to co-workers and co-patrons.

Furthermore, health problems created by smoking increase insurance and hospital costs for the general population. Smoking-related illnesses keep workers home from the job and increase the cost of products. Smoking, therefore, represents a heavy hidden tax on innocent, hard-working people. There is absolutely nothing to recommend it morally.

There are, of course, mitigating factors. An objectively sinful act that is the result of long-standing habit is less culpable than an act that is unencumbered by deep-seated habit. There is no moral excuse, however, for someone beginning such a habit today, given all that is known about the harmful effects of smoking.

**Q.** I think the bishops' pastoral letters on nuclear war and the economy are charters for surrender in foreign policy and for socialism at home. I shall pay no attention whatsoever to their dumb views. Is that wrong?

**A.** Yes, because the bishops are your official teachers.

Some Catholics like yourself often complain about the so-called double magisterium approach to doctrine. This approach is often falsely portrayed in this way: In Column A we have the teachings of the hierarchy, and in Column B we have the teachings of the theologians. Pick and choose your favorite answers from one or the other column.

Your attitude suggests that we should choose only from a third column marked "Personal Opinions."

Unless you have solidly based reasons

and arguments, you have no business as a Catholic challenging the doctrinal and moral judgments of your bishops.

If you do challenge such judgments on the basis of your personal opinions alone, then your approach to the Church's teaching authority is far more radical than that of any contemporary theologian. And if you ridicule the bishops in the process, you are guilty not only of the sin of disobedience but of scandal as well.

**Q.** I regard Father Curran as an egotistical, disobedient, proud idiot. He should do the honest thing for a change and join up with all those atheists and communists and sexual perverts that he seems to love so much. My wife tells me I shouldn't say such things about a priest. Is she right?

**A.** Yes. According to the catechism theology you probably want to defend to your dying breath, every validly ordained priest is "another Christ." As a sacred person, he merits the utmost reverence and respect, even if, in his personal moral life, he has lapsed from God's standards. He is still a priest.

That doesn't mean you can never disagree with a priest's opinions or actions. But it does mean that in expressing your disagreement, you must never show a fundamental disrespect for the person of the priest himself.

You have done that in your unkind, uncharitable, and even slanderous references to Father Curran, who, by the way, enjoys the fullest respect of his own bishop.

Accordingly, your wife is right. You have seriously sinned and you must go to confession as soon as possible, assuming, of course, that you are truly sorry and will strive never to commit that sin again. Otherwise, you're just one more unrepentant sinner.

**Q.** I don't like all the criticism I'm hearing these days about the television evangelists. What's wrong with ministers preaching against abortion, pornography, sexual perverts, and mealy-mouthed treatment of criminals and Commies? I send money to support Jimmy Swaggart as often as I can. Why should I have to apologize for that as a Catholic?

**A.** Jimmy Swaggart uses the money you send him to go down to Latin America to entice millions of Catholics away from their faith. He regards Catholics as non-Christians. He once called Catholicism a cult.

In sending money to anti-Catholic proselytizers, you are supporting their efforts to drive your fellow Catholics out of the Church.

Go to confession and resolve to sin no more.

Ah, for the good old days when you called a sin, a sin!

To the left of the principal altar is a freestanding baptismal font, and a new shrine to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton now stands near the door that opens onto Park Place.

The altar itself also has been changed significantly. The wooden table at which Mass had been celebrated in recent years has been replaced by a marble altar, which is also seated closer to the congregation. Because it has been a symbol of St. Patrick's Church since its establishment, the marble rear altar remains in its traditional location, and will now be used for private prayer.

Renovations also included the restoration of the pews, the addition of recessed lighting to eliminate hanging fixtures, an improved sound system and a new coat of paint on the church's interior.

The May 6 rededication demonstrated that all the hard work had paid off. After seeing the finished project, many who previously had criticized Father Holland and the parish council were beaming with pride after the 90-minute dedication.

"Now that it's done, even some of the people who didn't approve of what we were doing liked what they saw," Nurnberg said. "I saw a woman who said she was going to go back to St. Mary's on the south side when we started the work. She told me today she couldn't believe how nice our church turned out."

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## Father Avery Dulles, SJ

The April 5 issue of the National Catholic Register included an interview with a remarkable American Jesuit, Father Avery Dulles. His father was Secretary of State under President Eisenhower. His uncle was CIA director Allan Dulles. Avery was a bright young student at Harvard in the late 1930s. After graduation, he became an assistant dean at the university.

While a student, Avery Dulles had become a habitue of St. Benedict Book Store in Harvard Square, run by an erudite lady, later Sister Catherine, and under her guidance in reading and discussion, he became a Catholic. Shortly afterward, he assisted her and Father Leonard Feeney, SJ, in founding St. Benedict's Center at the Square, which became a focal point for intellectual young Catholics and the source of many conversions to the Church.

After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Father Dulles entered the Jesuit order. He is recognized as a responsible theologian and serves on the theological faculty of Catholic University. Those who think C.U. is riddled with Curranitis can take courage in Father Dulles' clear responses on many subjects: ecumenism, dissent, American bishops, theologians, the resurrection of our Lord and, finally, the Eucharist.

The following questions and answers have been excerpted from the Register's April 5, 1987, "Dialogue" between Father Dulles and Charlotte Hays:

**Register:** Is there a healthy role for dissent in the Church?

**Dulles:** It can have a constructive role. It doesn't always, unfortunately. A great deal depends on motives. It seems to me that it's possible and not uncommon for statements of (p)opes and bishops to be deficient in one or another respect. And by studying other statements of (p)opes and bishops and pondering Catholic tradition and Scripture, we can further nuance and perhaps correct to some extent what's in a teaching.

**Register:** But has dissent gotten out of hand in this country? Is it essentially irresponsible?

**Dulles:** I don't want to point fingers. But there's a tendency to glorify dissent.

Again, this isn't due so much to individual theologians as to the way in which the media tend to dramatize things.

**Register:** So it doesn't seem to you that dissent is off the deep end in some quarters of the American Church?

**Dulles:** Well, I am sometimes surprised at the confidence with which dissenting people propose their own opinions — almost as though they were an alternate magisterium. This I've never favored. I've never felt that theologians had a magisterium that could compete with that of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

**Register:** Is the Eucharist sufficiently emphasized in today's Catholicism?

**Dulles:** People certainly do assemble for the Eucharist, and nearly every time people want some kind of liturgy, it's the Eucharist. From that point of view, we almost overstress the Eucharist.

The problem is, we push the social dimensions of it so much that people are often more aware of the worshipping community than of the Lord. We need more of the kind of devotion Elizabeth Seton had to the Eucharist.

Real, personal Eucharistic devotion can hardly be found among younger Catholics I know. They don't make visits to the Blessed Sacrament and they don't have the inner peace and joy of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which sustained Seton through all her trials. We need more of what she had. It's something which belongs to a Catholic tradition of many centuries!

For copies of the complete interview (which was printed in the March 29 and April 5 issues of the Register), contact The National Catholic Register, 6404 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 900, Los Angeles, Calif. 90048, or call (213)653-2200.

## 'Raising a Moral Child' set for East Rochester School

The Dreikurs Family Education Association of Rochester, a non-profit organization dedicated to understanding and improving adult-child relationships, will present the lecture "Raising a Moral Child" Dr. Dennis Boike will speak on the topic on Thursday, May 21, at the T.L.R. Morgan Middle School, East Ave., East Rochester at 7:30 p.m.

This presentation will focus on how children learn morality and several techniques for enhancing moral development.

The lecture is open to the public. A \$1 donation will be asked for non-members of the Dreikurs Association. Call (716)248-8666 or 381-3999 for information.

## Vietnam vets to march in parade

Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 20, invites all Vietnam-era veterans to join them in honoring fellow service men and women, when the group marches in the Rochester Memorial Day parade on Monday, May 25.

Call (716)454-2539 for starting location and details of the family picnic that will follow the parade.

## Correction

In last week's article on the Holy Family Parish women who bake Communion hosts, we incorrectly identified Millie Andrews — rather than Marge Pollotta — as being deceased. We apologize to Mrs. Andrews, who is very much alive, and to her family for the mistake.

## Rededication

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in its history — from January to April, to allow architect/interior designer J. Victor Bagnardi and general contractor Roger McKamey to complete their work before Easter. In the meantime, parishioners attended services at St. John's Church and St. Cecilia's in Elmira.

The project also required that the edifice be nearly gutted, a move that was painful for some parishioners. The most controversial changes involved the removal of the two side altars, one dedicated to the Blessed Mother and the other to St. Joseph. But according to Father Holland, liturgical directives both during and after the Second Vatican Council call for the elimination of multiple altars.

A new shrine to the Blessed Mother now sits where the altar dedicated to St. Joseph was previously located. St. Joseph's shrine now stands by the door that opens onto North Main Street. The shrines incorporate the statues from the original side altars.

Father Holland believes that the new shrines — with kneelers for personal prayer and without altar rails — will offer a more personal sense of devotion.

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