

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



More bits and pieces

About the Marian Year: Pope John Paul II opened a year of special devotion to Mary at Rome's basilica of St. Mary Major on June 6, with a multilingual recital of the rosary that was televised around the world.

If you were the pope, would you have called a Marian Year at this time? Why or why not? If you had decided to call a Marian Year, would you have inaugurated it with a worldwide, multilingual recitation of the rosary? Why or why not?

How else might the pope have begun the Marian Year?

Some readers will be offended that such questions should even be posed. No faithful Catholic second-guesses the Holy Father. He alone decides, and what he decides is always best for the Church.

What about the bishops, then? Don't they also share in the governance of the Church? And what about deceased popes? Does their authority end at the grave?

I have in mind particularly the two Marian encyclicals by the late Pope Pius XII — *Fulgens Corona* (1953) and *Ad Caeli Reginam* (1954), and the 7,000-word document, "Marian Devotion," issued by the late Pope Paul VI.

Pius XII exhorted us to turn to Mary, "asking bread for the hungry, and justice for the oppressed." Paul VI insisted that Mary 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."

If we are to have a spiritually fruitful Marian Year, it ought to make the rich and powerful among us more uncomfortable, and give the poor and oppressed among us new hope.

About papal trips: I raised a question in an earlier column about the pastoral value of various papal trips around the world.

I suggested that some trips seem to have been pastorally successful (for example, the trips to Great Britain and to certain Latin American countries), while others seem to have been neutral at best, pastorally counterproductive at worst (for example, the trips to France and the Netherlands, and the first trip to the United States).

An example of the latter was his recent visit to Argentina, where the Holy Father expended extraordinary energy and effort in support of the nation's restrictive divorce laws.

Less than a month after he left Argentina, that country adopted legislation legalizing divorce (the Chamber of Deputies had passed similar legislation last

October).

Public opinion polls in Argentina have indicated that at least 70 percent of the overwhelmingly Catholic population favors legalized divorce. Did the pope change any minds during his visit? Was his visit worth the time, energy and money?

And does the Holy Father now regret that he took the advice of the Argentine bishops and said practically nothing about the violation of human rights during the "dirty war," nor about the thousands of "disappeared?"

Would he have had a more positive pastoral impact in Argentina and throughout Latin America generally if he had emphasized the Church's teachings on social justice and human rights rather than the need to retain strict anti-divorce laws?

About pessimism on the Right: Those of us in the middle-to-senior generations of Catholics readily recall the handy Latin formulae of the pre-Vatican II textbooks. For example, *In medio stat virtus* (Virtue stands in the middle).

Traditional Catholics (as opposed to "traditionalist" Catholics) instinctively search for the middle ground, for the center-point between the two extremes. (Regular readers of this column know how traditional I am in that respect.)

Thus, the cardinal virtue of hope stands in the middle between the left-wing extreme of presumption and the right-wing extreme of despair.

People who live at the extremes rather than "in the middle" where true virtue resides often confuse their extreme views with virtue itself. For example, a person who really despairs of God's goodness and mercy, and lacks confidence in the universal efficacy of Christ's redemptive work, thinks he (or she) is being pious and spiritual.

It is as if giving glory to God requires us to disparage God's creation.

A recent letter to the editor of one of my weekly Catholic outlets issued a warning: "I hate to break the news to Father McBrien, but one thing that hasn't changed is that the world is still the veil of tears it has been for its entire history."

What a pity that the product of God's creative hand, of Christ's redemptive work, and of the Holy Spirit's renewing power can be written off that way.

Unfortunately, some Christians do believe that sin is stronger than grace, and that we humans can produce nothing but more sin. But we Catholics are supported to believe just the opposite: grace is stronger than sin, and what we achieve by God's grace contributes to the coming of God's own Kingdom.

Registration opens for summer classes at St. John Fisher College

Registration for summer classes at St. John Fisher College is open for the second summer session, from July 6-August 14.

Course listings range from astronomy to Shakespeare and diverse class schedules

Regional Council on Aging offers support group for caregivers

For those experiencing the stress of caring for an older person, the Regional Council on Aging is beginning a support group, "Coping Skills for Caregivers of the Elderly," which will have its first meeting Friday, June 12, from 10 a.m. to noon at 34 Meigs St., Rochester, next to the Third Presbyterian Church on East Avenue.

allow for both day and evening classes.

Brochures are available in the continuing education office at the college. Registration may be completed by mail, in person or by phone, at (716)385-8317.

Nancy Nurick, a financial counselor, will speak on "Financial Health Care." The group will also provide a chance for participants to share their experiences and feelings with others facing similar situations.

For information or help with transportation, call Sandra Rakiewicz at (716)454-3224, ext. 112.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



In the lap of luxury

On Wednesday, May 27, I stayed up from midnight until past 1 a.m. to observe Ted Koppel's interview of Jim and Tammy Bakker. The affair had become such a nation *cause celebre* that it seemed reasonable to try to understand what was fascinating the American public about an affair that seems more soapy than "Dynasty" and "As the World Turns" — except that this was real life.

Koppel was not directly adversarial to the couple, but burrowed like Barbara Walters for the truth. Jerry Falwell had lambasted Jim Bakker pitilessly, accusing him of impenitence and power hunger. Jim and Tammy, obviously shaken by the revelations, sat lovingly together explaining, apologizing and hoping for a return to their shattered ministry.

It seems to me that Bakker's confessed adultery has been overplayed. Adultery is a fat mortal sin, but it is not so uncommon as to make the public waves it has. On Judgment Day, when all things will be revealed, many of those revelling in Jim's tumble will be revealed as guilty of that same sin, but with greater frequency. King David did worse, but God forgave him and made him a favorite, which has always been a mystery to me.

It would seem to me that the Bakkers might better go into quiet retirement, say their prayers and become practicing Christians — for I do not doubt that they really love the Lord Jesus — and then open up a nice bakery shop in California.

Jim explained that his extramarital adventure was really an attempt to make Tammy jealous, since their marriage was on the rocks. This is a bit fishy, since some friend of his allegedly shared in the adventure. Jim did express repentance for that sin. Why doubt it?

Far worse was all that money and luxury business, culling millions of dollars from devout listeners who sent money out of love of our Lord. Even worse was that awful worldliness: plush living, plush homes, luxuriating in worldly goods with money sent by poor believers to spread the Kingdom of God.

With the dreadful poverty in the Third World — and also in the First World — it is a scandal for the rich to luxuriate in notorious extravagance. Think of the Marcoses, who spent extravagantly on

Imelda's 3,000 pairs of shoes, roomfuls of clothing and luxury items, millions in property, and lavish entertainment, while desperately needy people searched garbage dumps in order to survive. Likewise with Papa Doc in Haiti. Likewise in many countries in Africa and South America. At least these political thugs do not claim to act in the name of Jesus.

The notoriety of religious preachers does great harm to genuine religion. Our own Catholic Church occasionally suffers a similar tarnish from some of our own, but these occasions are few. And we have Mother Teresa and her 1,000 dedicated Missionaries of Charity; Father Damien, Brother Dutton and the Syracuse Franciscan Sisters; Don Bosco and Mother Elizabeth Seton. All pioneers in raising the poor and rejected, their works continue in their successors, who represent genuine Catholicism.

In our own diocese, we have the multiple works of Father Callan and his disciples at Corpus Christi, Rochester; the works for battered women, unwed mothers and their babies; soup kitchens in many places; beds for the homeless in others. We have Sister Pat Flynn's St. Michael's Wood Shop to train black youths in a trade to make them self-reliant. We have the work for the poor in the Owego area, as well as in Steuben and Cayuga counties and many other places. And this good work is done on shoestring financing by dedicated people. The meager cash that does accrue to these works and workers is not spent for the comfort of the workers, or for earrings, mink coats and plush living, but for the poor and the needy who are served in Jesus Christ. A check written for any one of these is a safe act of charity.

The abnormal always gets attention. The unpublicized, quiet work of truly devout men and women, on the other hand, is the Christian norm. Why waste time agitating about aberrations when we can praise and help the works of the good?

For cynics — and they are many — let me recommend *The City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre (Doubleday Publishers). This book gives courage and humility to those who think that all idealism has gone to the dogs. Bishop Hogan, on the occasion of a confirmation, mentioned it with a kind of awe. Why not try it?

Sisters of Mercy welcome two teachers into congregation

The Sisters of Mercy of Rochester will welcome two candidates, Linda Tornabene and Sheila Miller, into the novitiate during a prayer service Sunday, June 14, at 2:30 p.m. in the Mercy motherhouse.

Tornabene was a teacher and administrator in the Rochester City School District for 12 years. The daughter of Fino and Grace Tornabene of Rochester, she is currently studying for a master's degree in theology from St. Bernard's Institute.

Miller has been principal of Annunciation

Trip to 'The Castle' set for Ladies Guild in June

St. Helen's Ladies Guild is sponsoring a trip to "The Castle" in Olean for a medieval feast and show on Thursday, June 25. Buses will leave St. Helen's parking lot, 310 Hinckley Road, Rochester, at 8:30 a.m., and return at 6:30 p.m.

All are welcome to attend. Call (716)235-1567 or 436-6037 for details.

School in Rochester for the past two years. She was previously a teacher and is also a former member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. Her parents are Alfred Miller of Rochester and the late Norine Miller Miller.

Both women have been candidates in the congregation since 1986. They will live at the Mercy motherhouse during the novitiate.

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