

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



Toning down the Bible

Anyone who has studied the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke knows that they agree substantially in content and in form, yet there are also numerous and striking differences in details.

The many areas of agreement make it plain that there was a large measure of literary interdependence among the three Gospels. Which Gospel was dependent upon which is a question that has preoccupied Scripture scholars for decades, and still does.

But what about the significant differences in detail? There are various explanations here as well.

One such explanation is that, on occasion, a later Gospel writer found it pastorally prudent to "tone down" some of the stronger material of an earlier, more original version of the Gospel (usually Mark's).

Let's take three examples at random:

1) When Jesus and a few of his disciples were crossing the Lake of Genesareth, a great storm arose. The waves beat against the boat, and the boat began filling with water.

Jesus was asleep, so the disciples had to wake him. In Mark's version (4:38), the disciples speak boldly to Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?"

In Matthew and Luke, however, their bold words are softened, lest the disciples seem to lack a proper reverence for the Lord. Matthew has them saying only, "Save, Lord; we are perishing" (8:25). In Luke, the passage reads, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" (8:24).

2) Jesus returns to his native town of Nazareth, where he meets with derision and rejection. Mark reports that, because of the townspeople's unbelief, "he could do no mighty work there" (6:5).

Lest his readers be scandalized by the Lord's powerlessness in the face of unbelief, Matthew tones Mark down; "And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (13:58).

3) A rich young man throws himself at Jesus' feet and asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" According to Mark, Jesus answered, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (10:17-18).

Again, Matthew tones it down, lest his readers be led to think that Jesus is renouncing any claim to equality with the Father: "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good" (19:17).

Fortunately, the canon of Sacred Scripture is now closed, and no more "toning down" of texts is possible. But suppose that the canon were not closed, and suppose further that some of our contemporaries had the opportunity of additional "prudent" editing for sound pastoral reasons, to be sure!

Wouldn't some want to "tone down" Jesus' strong words against a slavish

obedience to religious laws? After all, for some of our contemporaries, to be a good Catholic is to obey any and every law or rule mandated by church authorities.

A first example: The Pharisees attacked Jesus because his disciples didn't fast, because they plucked grain in violation of sabbath laws and because Jesus himself healed on the sabbath (Mark 2:18-3:6).

Jesus defended himself and his disciples on all counts. He replied, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (2:27).

Perhaps a latter-day editor would feel the need to change the text to something like this: "Sabbath laws are God-given, and only God or those to whom God grants the authority can change them or dispense from them."

Take a second example: When Peter rebuked Jesus for predicting that he would have to suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and the chief priests, and then be killed, Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men!" (Mark 8:33).

Since our imaginary editor would not want today's Catholics reading such a direct rebuke of the "first pope" by the Lord himself, they might be tempted to "tone down" the text by adding to it: "But you, Peter, do stand with me on the side of God against all of Satan's wiles."

A third example: When the rich young man asked Jesus how he might achieve eternal life, Jesus told him that, beyond keeping all the commandments, the young man would have to sell all that he had and give it to the poor (Mark 10:21).

The young man, of course, went away sad because, as the Gospel tells us, "he had great possessions."

The disciples, too, were "amazed at his words." They said, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!"

In Mark's original version, Jesus didn't soften his teaching at all: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God" (10:25). The disciples were "exceedingly astonished."

With the rising economic status of U.S. Catholics, some are now in the category of the truly rich-by any economic standard. How might a contemporary editor, worried about bringing "spiritual discomfort" to the Church's generous benefactors, deal with such a hard saying?

How indeed? You guess this time.

This is only a game, of course. The canon of scripture is closed. There can be no more editing.

But no matter. We seem to have found an even more effective method of "toning down" hard sayings. We simply ignore them.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



The apostolate of the pen

If someone should ask me what I consider my most important apostolate, I'd answer, "Celebrating Mass. That is the apex of a priest's calling. But after that comes the apostolate of the pen." Here are a few examples:

To a Corning barrister: "The enclosed card on which I had written your name just came to light and has me puzzled. Are you the man who inquired about a daily missal, and I said I would get one for you? If so, then I failed. If you are someone else, let me know what I was supposed to do, please. If you are the daily Mass person, I remember remarking at the time what a privilege it is for those who are able to go. And as I recall, you had a nice young son who served my Mass very well. Bless him!"

Comment: I frequently take people's names and addresses to get for them a book, an article, a tape or something to intensify the faith — and often forget what has been requested. It is hard for me to understand why people who go regularly to daily Mass do not have a daily missal. It provides familiarity with the Scriptures day after day, and prepares the worshiper for the Mass beforehand. The edition I recommend especially is the *Vatican II Week Day Missal*, published by the Daughters of St. Paul. It has a short preface to the Mass, a brief profile of the saints of the day by Archbishop Whealon and a brief meditation after each daily Mass.

From Graham Greene, author: "Thank you for sending me a copy of your letters in the diocesan Courier-Journal ... I am honoured by your praise."

Comment: The note came from Avenue Pasteur, 006600 Antibes, France. Nice to have our diocesan paper known by so illustrious an author. I had written to thank him for his book, *Monsignor Quixote*, which had been made into a TV film starring Alec Guinness and Frank McKern.

From Professor Richard M. Loomis, Nazareth College: "Thanks for expressing interest in my edition of *The Life of Hugh of Avalon*, by Gerald of Wales. I am sending you a complimentary copy. Gerald's *Life* is in Latin. I give the Latin text with a facing translation, accompanied by in-

roduction and notes. I found it an exciting and inspiring project to work on. St. Hugh was a bishop after your own heart, a stalwart defender of the Church — with a sense of humor!"

Comment: Dr. Loomis has been with the English department at Nazareth since 1970. He is a specialist in medieval literature, and proficient in the Welsh language, which partly accounts for his interest in St. Hugh. The book is formidable in its scholarship, and I will be glad to lend it to anyone who is devoted to genuine scholarship and medieval history. I blush at Dr. Loomis's kindness toward me, and I congratulate Nazareth College in having him on the faculty.

From a literary buff: "I am disappointed that you never mention the works of J.F. Powers. His novel, *Morte D'Urban*, an Arthurian tragicomedy about the death to sin of a huckster priest, is a classic. His short stories are frequently compared to those of Flannery O'Connor ... Though I fell away from the Church a good while ago, I do continue to enjoy very much your column, and especially admire the unique apostolate you have chosen for the expression of your priesthood!"

Comment: Flannery O'Connor's letters are inspiring. Her short stories, classics though they may be, are so dismal to me. J.F. Powers has insights into the weaknesses of the clergy that we priests enjoy for their contradictions and exaggerations. But they hardly edify. Far better is Bruce Marshall, the Scottish convert, who has written perceptively about the clergy, rectories and the Church, yet with cheerfulness and understanding. Graham Greene is more sophisticated. I consider his *Monsignor Quixote* a fine Eucharistic novel. In recommending the TV-film adaptation of the book, I mentioned Guinness's own quasi-autobiography, *Blessings in Disguise*, and am surprised at the number of people who have told me that they read the book with pleasure. I have found few novels to surpass *The Devil's Advocate* by Australian Morris West. Most of West's books are gripping, and most reflect the Church candidly and sympathetically.



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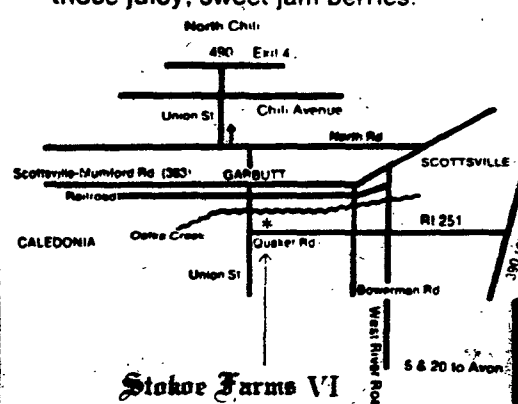
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