

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



The mail bag

This week I should like to disclose a new policy I've adopted regarding letters. Heretofore, I have tried to acknowledge every signed letter that I receive, even the mean-spirited ones, unless the name and address are impossible to decipher, or unless the contents are obscene and/or betray some mental disturbance.

A close friend of mine, a Catholic psychologist of national stature, has been urging me *not* to respond to the personally hostile letters. Such correspondents, he insists, are not interested in dialogue. They're only interested in getting a reaction. They want to provoke, not persuade. It's better simply to ignore the letters and leave their authors wondering.

Although it goes against the grain, I shall try it his way, at least for a while, and I offer the following recent exchange as a bit of evidence in favor of his recommendation.

In late June I received a "Dear Sir" letter from a woman who knows I'm a priest. I don't stand on titles, but one cannot ignore the hostility conveyed in the salutation.

My correspondent took exception to a column in which I supported the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letters on peace and the economy. She is opposed to the bishops' teaching and appealed to the "higher authority of the pope," who, she argued, "has never called for a laying down of arms or appeasement to the Soviets."

"Many of today's Roman Catholic bishops call themselves 'American Catholic' Bishops and they ridicule themselves," she continued. (No changes — grammatical or otherwise — have been made to the text of this letter.) "You mention picking and choosing your favorite answers from one or the other column. I feel today's Bishops and clergy do exactly the same. Find a fellow free thinker and join him."

"When you mention scandal," she concluded, "I find it incredible that you along with Charles Curran have brought more scandal to the Roman Catholic church than any two clergy in the country today!"

The letter ends without even a "Sincerely yours."

Under my new rule, I would not answer such a letter. Under my longstanding old rule, I did.

"I am sure you did not mean to imply that our bishops favor appeasement, or indeed that their teachings on social justice and peace are any different from the Holy Father's," I began. "Regarding Father Cur-

ran, I am enclosing a copy of his own bishop's evaluation of him as a priest and a theologian. I am sure that Bishop Clark knows Father Curran better than you do.

"We can differ among ourselves as Catholics," I concluded, "but we must do so in a way that doesn't violate Christian charity."

Within a week, I received a second letter, this time addressed, "Dear Father:" (Again, the letter is quoted verbatim.)

"The dictionary says the word 'imply' means to indicate without saying openly. Rest assure you that I am not implying that the Bishops favor appeasement. I am definitely saying it. I want to make sure you understand this.

"The Holy Father has never asked that this country weaken its defense. I recall that he was a Nazi resistance fighter in Poland. He knows the price one pays for appeasement. To have American Bishops support the Pax Christi movement, take stands against our military, and to open up our troops to a conventional war because we weaken our nuclear defense is foolhardy.

"As to your copy of Bishop Clark's defense of Charles Curran I am sending it back to you. Charles Curran is a Protestant. I do not agree with you that we can differ among ourselves as Roman Catholics. Division brings about schism."

Again, no "Sincerely yours." Just a signature.

I shall continue to acknowledge as many letters as possible, given the constraints of time. And this includes letters that take issue with the views expressed in this column.

This new rule is not intended to close off criticism and debate; both are necessary. The truth is always best served when there are open and honest exchanges of views. But *ad hominem* arguments poison the atmosphere and make any real clarification, much less correction, of views impossible.

So, if you want to make a point, by all means make it, but make it as clearly, as concisely and as civilly as you can.

When all else fails, follow the Lord's injunctions to love even the enemy (Luke 6:27-28), to avoid judgments and condemnations (6:29), and to be careful not to dwell on the speck in the brother's or the sister's eye while missing the plank in one's own (6:41-42).

It's not easy, of course, but that's what taking up one's cross and following Him is all about.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



Alec Guinness again

In May, 1986, I filled in for Father Paul Schnacky at Waverly. The village has a splendid library, donated by Howard and Helen Gunlocke of furniture fame. When I stopped in, a table held a selection of recent acquisitions. One was a quasi-autobiography by Alec Guinness, entitled *Blessings in Disguise*.

Of all actors, I admire him most. The librarian let me take the newly arrived book. While it is mostly about actors and actresses, a whole chapter is on religion. With a combination of seriousness and humor, Guinness tells how and why he became a Catholic, and why he remains one. One funny part is this:

Laden with a childhood and decades of Protestant prejudices against the Catholic Church, he gradually discovered how mistaken these beliefs were. He was quite drawn to the Catholic churches for their peace and tranquility, even though he did not realize the Eucharistic Presence. One day he decided to go to the neighboring St. Lawrence Church. He writes that if he met a cultured, scholarly priest he would ask for instructions in the faith, intending however to accept what he liked and ignore what he did not. But if he "met a big, red-faced Irish priest" who would greet him with an Irish-brogue "Top 'o the morning," he would turn and flee. Fortunately, he met a cultured English Father Clark, who himself had been an Anglican priest. Guinness bought the faith.

The *Catholic Digest* published most of the chapter on religion, but omitted the part about the red-faced Irish priest. I had written a review of the Guinness autobiography and sent it to Sir Alec, expressing my glee at the omission: "I wonder if the digest has some Irish Jansenist working in the censorship department, or whether they are concerned about Irish sensitivity," I wrote. I also asked him to consider making a film on the life of Father Damien, the leper-priest of Molokai. His reply, handwritten in violet ink, combined courtesy, humor, memory, information and humility:

"Please excuse the Lenten violet ink. Thank you for your letter of July 30 with the article, which I liked very much.

"Oh, dear. I must put things right with the Irish priesthood. I know only two or three Irish priests, who are wonderful and holy men — one of them is undoubtedly

a saint. But I have come across some rasping, bullying ones — in New York and Boston, I regret to say.

"Regarding Father Damien. Some twenty years ago, I embarked upon a film script about his life in Molokai. (Robert Stevenson's open letter to Mr. Hyde got me going.) However, no one was interested. Word about it got into the press here in England, and there were indignant letters from leper colonies who object to being referred to as lepers. One couldn't very well title the film, 'Damien, the Sufferer from Hanson's Disease.' Later I tried to persuade Richard Burton to tackle Damien. But it all fizzled away.

"I had the same lack of luck when I thought I'd like to do a film about Father Charles deFoucauld. However, the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) did so, some years later, a short TV (film) on deFoucauld, which was rather admirable.

"Please, you mustn't think I am a 'good Catholic' — just one of the semi-faithful who happily run with the Church. Yours sincerely . . ."

May I recommend these books: *Damien, the Leper* by John Farrow, the late husband of Maureen O'Sullivan; *Holy Man, Father Damien of Molokai* by Gavan Daws, professor of history at the University of Hawaii; and several books about Charles deFoucauld.

Very few seem to know about deFoucauld, though his life is thrilling, both for his bizarre youth and his unpredictable development. He was a Frenchman, born in the 1860s into a wealthy, aristocratic family. He abandoned the faith at 15 and lived a riotous, repulsive life until he was 25. Then this restless soul went to Morocco, which was then closed to Europeans, disguised as a Russian rabbi. He mapped the unknown Morocco, added information of the country and was acclaimed as a great cartographer. He returned to the Church under the guidance of a French convert, Father Huviland, and ended up a holy witness to Christ among the Muslims in the Sahara. He wrote the constitution for a religious community he hoped to establish, but no one would join him. Some 20 years after his murder, the constitution was discovered and became the guide for the famous Little Brothers of the Poor, an order similar to Mother Teresa's community.

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