

Father Richard P. McBrien

# Essays in Theology



## Back to the catacombs?

I was intrigued by a mid-summer story in the Chicago Tribune, "Right-wing Catholics stewing" (Sunday, July 26). According to the report by Bruce Buursma, the paper's religion writer, some conservative Catholics in the United States have been "stunned by apparent setbacks to their cause."

Their sense of dismay was sharply heightened, Buursma observed, by the relatively peaceful resolution of the crisis that was precipitated last year by the Vatican's disciplinary action against Archbishop Hunthausen of Seattle.

Alphonse Matt, publisher of the independent and vigorously conservative Catholic weekly *The Wanderer* told the Chicago Tribune that the outcome of the Hunthausen case represented a "capitulation by the Holy See . . . to the modernists and Americanists in the church."

In what Buursma described as "a surprisingly sharp rebuke of the pope's action," Matt claimed that Pope John Paul II was swayed by a "full-court press" from major U.S. bishops.

"The climate has changed dramatically — and not for the good," Matt complained. "I'm digging in for the long haul. We may be in for another time in the catacombs. But they'll never dislodge the *Wanderer* types from the church."

It was that last sentence in particular that caught my eye. Who would ever want to "dislodge" Al Matt or anyone else from the Catholic Church? I cannot imagine anyone, except perhaps in *The Wanderer's* own circle of readers, who would urge that anyone else be hounded out of the Church.

Indeed, one major reason why the atmosphere in the Catholic Church has been so poisoned in recent years is that many hard-right Catholics have been obsessed with booting fellow Catholics out of their jobs, and preferably out of the Church as well.

They have worked behind the scenes to get bishops into hot water with the Vatican. They have carried on campaigns to have theologians removed from their teaching positions. They have applied constant pressure on pastors and bishops to have directors of religious education fired. They have taken credit for the withdrawal of imprimaturs from books and for the investigation of their authors.

The letters of such people are filled with mean-spirited language, urging the recipient to get out of the Church or expressing the hope that someone in authority will finally have the courage to expel the object of their disdain. (I have a full file of such letters.)

According to the Chicago Tribune story, all these efforts now seem to have backfired. A Catholic journalist "with conservative credentials" maintains that this belligerent style has become "a hindrance to the cause."

Reasonable people, including many conservatives in the hierarchy, have been shocked and appalled by the venomous, anti-Christian spirit of these letter-writers.

Eugene Kennedy, a nationally known scholar and writer on the faculty of Chicago's Loyola University, told the Tribune that the conservatives' reaction to the peaceful resolution of the Hunthausen case shows that they were "not interested in reconciliation."

Now that the Holy Father has been part of a happy collegial resolution in which there were no winners and no losers, they can't stand the thought there was no one humiliated in the process."

That's the key word, isn't it? "Humiliated." There is a passion to punish, and a passion to humiliate.

It isn't enough that Father Charles Curran, for example, has lost his right to teach theology at The Catholic University of America, an institution to which he has given more than two decades of his life.

No, Father Curran must also be heaped with scorn. He must be denounced as "disobedient," "irresponsible," "a Protestant," "a scandal," "an enemy of the Church," etc. And he must not be allowed to teach anywhere else, or to lecture, or to do anything at all under any kind of Catholic sponsorship. He is to be a pariah.

On the other hand, the Hunthausen case, whose resolution has so disturbed the Catholic right, "was not a contest that ended with the slaying of the dragon," Kennedy noted. "They should retire the myth of St. George and the dragon and return to the myth of Jesus as the Good Shepherd."

In the spirit of the Good Shepherd, we should all insist that no Catholic brother or sister should even think of returning to the catacombs. Catacombs are for times of persecution. Our government isn't persecuting us, and we shouldn't be persecuting one another.

In the meantime, if anyone tries to "dislodge" Al Matt from the Catholic Church, I hope many will join in his defense. He and those who agree with him have as much right to be Catholics and to express their views as any other members of the Church.

"Hence, let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 92).

Father Paul J. Cuddy

# On the Right Side



## The correspondence file

To Assemblyman Robert King  
Albany, New York 12248:

"As a weekly columnist for our Rochester *Courier-Journal* I have frequent occasions to verify some fact or date, to get reference materials, to borrow some particular book or article. For years, I have phoned the Rochester Public Library for help, and am always pleased and grateful for their prompt and efficient service. I am also somewhat of an habitue of our Webster Public Library, and am impressed by the many programs for the local folk, especially the children.

"Recently, after a researcher at the Rochester Public Library got me a fairly abstruse bit of information and relayed it to me over the phone, I said, 'You people are always so good about helping. What can I do to express appreciation?' The lady answered cheerfully, and wistfully, 'You could write to our legislators and encourage them to give needed funds for our work.'

"So this letter is both a tribute to you of the valuable service our libraries give and a request for state funds to continue this valued service.

"With sentiments of esteem, I am . . .  
"Copy to Governor Mario Cuomo."

From Mr. William Raven  
Black River, New York 13612:

"I met a deacon at the National Conference of Deacons at Notre Dame this month who said this is your address, so I am trying it.

"Remember me? I was your chaplain's assistant in San Antonio about 1954, Lackland Air Force Base. In 1960, you married me and Barbara Forand in Boonville, N.Y.

"Barbara and I had three children, and she died of cancer in 1979. In 1982, I married Frances Nolan who had four children. Together we have seven, with six grandchildren and one more on the way. I am starting my fourth year of studies toward the permanent diaconate. I retired last month after 28 years in education — 10 teaching and 18 as a high school principal.

"Please drop me a line. I would like to know if I have the right address . . ."

Comment: In 1954, Bill Raven was a very blond, tall youth about 22 years old. He was

a convert to the Church, instructed largely through a Protestant Bible correspondence course, followed up by a Catholic correspondence course. He was intensely interested in religion and was one of the most biblically knowledgeable people I have known. Our paths parted when I was transferred to Casablanca in Morocco in December, 1954. Though we corresponded rarely, he asked me to witness the marriage in 1960. From then on he disappeared until the above letter came in late August.

To Mr. William Raven:

"This is just a quick note to say your letter came safely — forwarded to St. Ann's Home/The Heritage in Rochester, where I am filling in for two weeks for the much-loved chaplain, Father Glogowski — and to say how delighted I am to hear from you.

"Doubly delighted that you are in the deaconate program. We have a super-deacon, Leo Kester, as our parish deacon. He is married and has 13 children. He was a structural engineer at Kodak, but took early retirement to do his deacon work. His wife is a wonder. Although she has muscular dystrophy, she gets around and is a great help to her husband. The two are going to Detroit to meet the pope when he meets with the deacons at the end of his trip. I hope your wife goes along happily with your deaconizing. A wise wife can be a big help.

"Well, that's all for now. I will be 79 next week, and thank God, as enthusiastic for Christ and His Church as I was in 1954. Next to the Mass and sacraments, probably my most effective ministry is a weekly column in our diocesan *Courier-Journal*.

"Please send me your telephone number. I should like to talk with you. Almost my only Lackland contacts are Larry Timmins in Detroit and Paul Knox. Remember him? He was the Protestant chaplain's assistant. He was a good organist, the grandson of two Methodist ministers. We have remained good friends from our Lackland days. I think what clinched our friendship was a glorious St. Patrick's Day party we had in my quarters, spilling over with ebullience from celebrating airmen. Anyway, do send me your telephone number. And I am so glad to hear from you."

## Group aiding abused elderly to begin meeting in Rochester

The Regional Council on Aging will be starting a support group to help the needs of those elderly people who have been abused. The group will start Friday, September 18, and will meet on the first and third Friday mornings of the month at the Church of the Incarnate Word, 597 East Ave., Rochester from 10 a.m. to noon.

Each meeting will include lecture on an issue helpful and informative for those attending. Pat Huntington of the Victim's Assistance Unit at the Rochester Police Department will

speak September 18 on the common feelings of victimization and services available for those who are abused. After the talk there will be an opportunity for people to share some of their feelings and experiences.

Please contact the Regional Council on Aging at (716) 454-3224, ext. 112 for information.

Beginning on the evening of September 30, the six-session training will include psychological aspects of aging, medical problems, improving communications and community resources.

## 'Kisses for Kids' campaign eases pain of childhood cancer

Kisses for Kids, a campaign to help make the pain of childhood cancer hurt less, is again being offered by the CURE Childhood Cancer Association on September 25, 26 or 27 at the following locations: McCurdy's at Eastview, Marketplace, Midtown, Irondequoit,

Northgate Malls; Bells Supermarkets in Geneva and Seneca Falls; Ames Discount Store, Apples & Clancy's Big M in Brockport; Bauch's IGA and Bob's Grocery in Hamlin; the Rochester Public Market; and the Hilton Apple Festival.

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