

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



Catholics in America

Last month I called attention to a survey of Notre Dame graduates, published in the summer issue of Notre Dame Magazine.

The survey found that Notre Dame alumni/ae have become increasingly progressive on matters of Church policy. They are happy with the changes wrought by Vatican II, and many graduates would prefer an even faster pace of change.

A CBS News-New York Times Poll, conducted in mid-August and released the day before the pope's arrival in Miami, comes to the same general conclusions.

Half of the Catholics surveyed view the Church as out of touch with the 1980s and in need of further updating.

A majority, for example, would like to change the requirements for the priesthood, allowing priests to marry and opening the ordained ministry to women.

What is striking is that the percentages in favor of change continue to grow every year. The Notre Dame survey uncovered exactly the same phenomenon. As time goes on and as educational levels are raised, the Catholic community in the United States becomes more, not less, favorable toward change.

Last month, in the midst of the Iran-Contra hearings, a group of conservative Catholic lay people, including two members of Congress, held a press conference in Washington, D.C., to protest the selection of the two lay consultants to this fall's synod on the laity.

They charged that the two nominees were not representative of the Catholic laity in the United States and offered instead the names of two strongly conservative Catholics: Phyllis Schlafly, head of the Eagle Forum, and Charles Rice, a member of Notre Dame's Law School faculty. Both are vigorous advocates of legislation to ban all abortions.

But how representative are such Catholics? The CBS News-New York Times Poll offers us yet one more piece of evidence that the great majority of their fellow Catholics do *not* agree with them.

Although 61 percent of the practicing Catholics in the survey sample are prepared to call abortion "murder," 29 percent nevertheless believe that abortion should be legal as it is now, and 48 percent believe that it should at least be legal in the case of rape, incest or danger to the mother's life.

Thus, a total of 77 percent of practicing Catholics believe that abortion should be legal under some circumstances. Only 19 percent would prohibit all abortions by law.

When asked if the bishops should try to persuade the federal government to adopt

the Church's official views on abortion, 33 percent answered in the affirmative, while 56 percent said, "no."

The point here is not to suggest that truth and Catholic doctrine are determined by opinion surveys. That's nonsense. But there is a point to be made. When those conservative Catholics urged that Phyllis Schlafly and Professor Charles Rice be appointed to the forthcoming synod on the grounds that Schlafly and Rice are more truly representative of the Catholic laity in America, they are simply wrong.

The evidence, not only of this CBS News-New York Times Poll but of every other survey like it, shows just the opposite to be the case.

Now one may deplore this situation and wring one's hands over the results of such surveys. But that's the way it is. The fact of the matter is that, in spite of a consensus among practicing Catholics that abortion is immoral, American Catholics do not think it prudent to try to get a law passed banning all abortions.

A solid majority of Catholics, therefore, disagree with their brethren in the right-to-life movement, and are supportive instead of the position taken by prominent Catholic politicians like Governor Cuomo; namely, that we must recognize the distinction between morality and law.

God's moral law may not be determined by consensus, but civil law surely is.

That may be a bitter pill for some to swallow — to recognize that Governor Cuomo, for example, is more representative of the People of God than they are — but that's what the evidence shows, time and time again.

And it won't do a bit of good to blame Father Curran, or Hans Kueng, or anybody else. If the question had been asked, I'd bet that only a handful of the surveyed Catholics would have even heard of such theologians, much less read anything they've written.

The people have made up their minds independently of the theologians. We theologians can bear that. Honest.

But the Catholic people have also made up their minds independently of *some* of their bishops. I emphasize "some" because there are many bishops who agree with the majority of the laity.

Those bishops and other Catholics who find themselves in the minority — a minority of roughly 20 percent — have failed to persuade about three-quarters of their fellow practicing Catholics of the wisdom of the own views.

It's always easier, of course, to blame someone else for one's own failures.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



To an innocent protestor

Let me raise my eyebrows in wonder at your innocence about the term "catting around." In my August 20 column, I wrote: "It is an injustice to assume that all people who are homosexually oriented are actively practicing, any more than to assume that all heterosexuals are catting around."

From that sentence you proceed to give a three-paragraph lecture to me on the sanctity of the marital union, as if I were so un-Catholic as not to reverence marriage — sacramental for the baptized; or for the unbaptized — holy in its nature.

Had you given three paragraphs to persuade me that Jesus is Lord and Savior, or that the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God, or that the Catholic Church was established by Christ, it would have been equally pointless. I embrace these teachings firmly and with enthusiasm, and I embrace equally the holiness of marital union, even as you so affirm: "Official Church teaching supports the divine nature of conjugal love." (par. 9) Do you think I didn't know that? And did you really think I was attacking conjugal love, when it was obvious I was attacking adultery?

Earlier you declared: "I am offended by Father Cuddy's reference to the fulfillment of Genesis commandment, 'Go forth and multiply' as some sort of free-wheeling feline fecundity." (par. 5.)

Could it be that having worked for an order of priests and brothers in Washington (par. 2) that you were so protected as to give you an innocence of St. Aloysius? While I may admire your innocence, I do not admire your nescience in this matter.

Don't you know what "catting around" means? While it is American slang, I assumed, evidently wrongly, that everyone knows what it means. The Dictionary of American Slang and Unconventional English (8th edition) has: "cat: - verb. To court or seek women for sexual reasons." I suppose the verb comes from "tom cat," which is defined in that same dictionary: "a cat roaming about in search of sexual satisfaction; acting like a Tom cat." Perhaps my life has been such as sometimes to prefer a bit of coarseness and crassness. And I do prefer the picturesque figure of speech "catting

about" to "adultery."

Staid expressions oftentimes do not give a desired impact.

Did you watch the Gary Hart-Ted Koppel interview, September 8, from 11:30 to 12:30 p.m.? In the interview Senator Hart acknowledged that he was separated twice from his wife and that he had been guilty of infidelity in his marriage. "Infidelity" is euphemistically softer than "catting around," but it means the same thing.

So when the dust settles and the terms are clarified, let us be friends. We really are on the same theological wavelength regarding marriage. We both honor the sacrament, and also the natural contract of marriage by the non-baptized. The fuss seems to be about understanding the English language, especially in the context of slang and unconventional language. Come to Webster some noon, and I will take you out to lunch. Or come on a Friday evening and I will treat you to a fish fry at our Webster Knights of Columbus Center. And in the meantime, cheers for holy marriage, and damnation for adultery, or in more picturesque language, for catting around.

Excerpt from letter of Chaplain Paul J. Freemesser, PSC Box 266, APO Miami 34005

"Friday, we left Panama for Santa Cruz, Bolivia, for 11 days. The Army, Navy and Air Force had joint operations with the Bolivians. We trained their soldiers, sent medical teams into villages, helped to build and engineer some roads, and set up water-purification facilities for some villages. In 1969, Santa Cruz was a town of 40,000, with dirt roads and wooden sidewalks like the old West. Today it is a modern city of 1 million with a fantastic airport built with a great deal of money and help from the Japanese. I was in charge of taking excess food and paper products to the old folks' home in Santa Cruz, run by European sisters, with 200 occupants and practically no money. The place is immaculate. All the healthy people help clean and take care of the buildings and care for the bedridden. Quite a difference from the USA. Thanks for sending the Msgr. Quixote and Medjugorje cassettes. Have enjoyed them very much. Best to Fr. Hart and Phil Billotte."

Meditation seminar scheduled

An all-day seminar on meditation will be offered on Saturday, October 10, at the Mercy Prayer Center in Rochester. The seminar will explore such forms of meditation as body/mind awareness as well as visualization practiced within a Christ-centered, scriptural orientation. The deadline for registration is September 30.

For information or registration, call (716) 987-8430. Information will also be available on a meditation group that meets weekly.

CORRECTION A "TASTE" OF IRELAND

The correct dates for the Ireland tour advertised by Jean Brown Travel are Nov. 18-22. For information call Jean Brown Travel at 716-889-9098.

Silver anniversary gala set for Bishop Kearney High School

The Silver Anniversary celebration of Bishop Kearney High School is scheduled for September 25 at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center.

Former faculty, alumni, parents of graduates and present students are all invited to join the Kearney family as it celebrates 25 years of Catholic education.

The gala will begin with a cocktail hour at 7 p.m. in the foyer of the convention center. Dinner is scheduled for 8:15 p.m.

The Pope Pius XII Council of the Iron-dequoit Knights of Columbus will present Bishop James E. Kearney's sabre to the school. The sabre will be displayed in the

foyer of the school.

Following celebration ceremonies, the "Masterbrass" will provide music for an evening of dancing.

Reservations are being accepted at Bishop Kearney High School, 125 Kings Highway S., Rochester, 14617. Tickets are \$25 per person, which includes a dinner choice of chicken or roast beef.

Call the school at (716)342-4000 for information.

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