

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



The object of Catholic faith

Now that Pope John Paul II has come and gone, it might be useful to reflect more deliberately on the place of the papacy in Catholic faith.

There was abundant commentary given before and during the pope's visit to the United States regarding his role as the Church's chief organizational leader. But there is a deeper issue at stake in the controversies that attract the media's attention, an issue not easily summarized in a lead paragraph or compressed into a 30-second spot.

If one reads carefully the letters to the editor in Catholic and secular papers and magazines, or listens attentively to the "homilies" of angry priests who use the pulpits to denounce theologians and other Catholics they regard as disobedient and disrespectful toward "Our Holy Father," or studies the rhetoric employed in the public statements that you know beforehand are going to put the best possible face on every Vatican pronouncement or decision, one notices something very fundamental at work.

There is an implicit shift in the central object of Catholic faith from Jesus Christ to the pope, and an equally fundamental shift in moral priorities from the Gospel to ecclesiastical rules.

I am not suggesting here some kind of opposition between Jesus and the papacy, or between the Gospel and Church law. The pope, like other ministers of the Church, exists to direct our minds and hearts to Christ. On the other hand, all ministers, including the pope, are to be like John the Baptist — never placing themselves on par with the Lord, but always decreasing in importance so that the Lord may increase (John 3:30).

Ecclesiastical rules and regulations, too, are supposed to help us put the Gospel into practice by providing directions and guidelines to get us started, so to speak, and to keep us more or less on a faithfully Christian course.

When a rule gets in the way of the Gospel, however, the rule is to be set aside — just as Jesus set aside many rules in order to heal the sick and give comfort to the afflicted, much to the chagrin of the rule tenders of his day (see, for example, Matthew 12:1-14).

If we are supposed to be critical of Catholics who deny the ministry of the pope or who reject the moral demands of Christian discipleship, we should also be critical of Catholics who exaggerate the ministry of the pope or who put rules before the Gospel, just as the scribes and pharisees were accused of doing.

Excess in one direction is no better than excess in another. Truth is in the middle.

The central object of Catholic faith is not the pope. Catholics aren't people who believe in the pope. The central object of Catholic faith is Jesus Christ. Catholics are people who believe in Jesus Christ.

If our loyalty to the pope or to the regulations of the Church leads us to forms of conduct that are opposed to the Gospel, then there is something radically wrong with our understanding and practice of Catholic faith.

Jesus taught us to be loving toward one another, even toward our enemies (Luke 6:27-28), and never to be vindictive (6:29).

Jesus taught us not to judge one another, lest we ourselves be judged (Luke 6:37).

Jesus taught us to be merciful and forgiving, just as the Father is merciful and forgiving toward us ("The Lord's Prayer," the parable of the prodigal son, etc.).

Jesus taught us by his example to break so-called man-made rules whenever they get in the way of God's own law of love and mercy (Mark 2:27; Matthew 23:23).

Jesus taught us never to be self-righteous, or to think of ourselves as morally superior to others (Luke 18:10-14).

Jesus taught us, again by his example, not to avoid the company of sinners, but to reach out to them as persons created and loved by a merciful and compassionate God (Mark 2:16).

Jesus taught us to love the poor and to be prepared at all times to sacrifice whatever we have for their sakes (Matthew 19:21). He denounced greed (Luke 20:47) and warned of the grave spiritual risks in having too many possessions (Mark 10:25).

This is what being a Catholic is all about. If the pope helps us to be more loving, more merciful, more compassionate, more forgiving, less judgmental, less self-righteous, more detached from worldly goods, and more devoted to the poor and the needy, then loyalty to the pope is a very good thing indeed.

But if, in the name of such loyalty, we are mean-spirited, vindictive, hard-hearted, unforgiving, judgmental, self-righteous and possessive, we have entirely missed the point of what it means to be a Catholic. Whatever else such behavior might reflect, it surely does not reflect true loyalty to Jesus Christ and to his Gospel.

And that's the deeper issue in all these intramural Catholic controversies.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



Papal coverage

Q: What did you think of our Holy Father's visit to the United States?

A: Glad and sad. The more than 80 hours of cable television coverage was super professional. In Rochester, coverage was shown on Channel 35 from 10 a.m. to midnight. What happened in other cities I don't know, but an indignant lady from Auburn phoned me in Webster saying: "I was in Rochester on Sunday at my sister's, and watched the pope's visit all day. But Auburn has nothing." For a city with seven parishes not to have provided for this event seems strange. I referred her to Father Albert Shamon, who connected her with friends in Geneva, which had Channel 29 in operation.

The sad part was that so few saw the extended papal visit. More people do not have cable than I realized. On Sunday after the pope left, I asked our congregation, totaling about 800 people at the two Masses I celebrated: "How many saw the visitation of our Holy Father on cable?" I was appalled to find only 6 percent. Later I phoned Mario Roderiguez, vice-president of Greater Rochester Cablevision on Mt. Hope Avenue, to thank him for the cable coverage and suggested that after the papal visit the time was ripe for his harvest.

Q: Who paid for the television presentation?

A: It must have cost a mint. I asked Father George Norton, our diocesan director of communications. He said that Mother Angelica and her Eternal Word Network (ETWN) spearheaded the project, and that the costs were shared by ETWN and also by the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA), a kind of Catholic bishops' parallel to ETWN. Father Norton also said that a portion of the annual collection taken up for communications in all dioceses paid for part of the cost of television coverage. I suggested: "Why not write an article for the Courier-Journal about this? Most people know about the annual collection, but wonder what ever happens to it. This could be reassuring."

Q: What impressed you most?

A: Oh, so many standouts. The enthusiasm of the people everywhere. One of the most touching to me was the ecstatic reception from the president, faculty and students of the University of South Carolina, a state with a Catholic population of 2 percent. Another meeting which especially touched me was with some 400 bigwigs in communications — print, television, radio and entertainment. The meeting even included Phil Donohue, who certainly is influential, although balefully so. The Holy Father graciously but bluntly

reminded them that they are a great source of influence and power, and have a corresponding responsibility. Despite the complexion of that group, they gave him a long and sincere ovation. I still can't figure that one out.

The meeting of the 300 bishops with the pope confirmed their fidelity to the successor of Peter. One curious note was that only two persons on the whole tour did not address the pope with the title "Holy Father." They were the priest who represented the priests, and the sister who said she spoke for 130,000 religious sisters. Their addresses to Pope John Paul II seemed to me to indicate a subtle challenge to him. And neither priest nor sister mentioned the Blessed Mother. This was the closest thing to verbal fencing I saw on the whole tour. When all addresses were finished, the whole assemblage in the San Francisco cathedral resounded with a rousing chanting of the Gregorian "Salve Regina" (Hail Holy Queen).

Q: What about all those reports that the pope was coming to scold the Church in the United States, and that a vast number of dissenters would make things hot for him?

A: Well, he did not scold, but encouraged. He did remind us of our opportunities and responsibilities. Excepting for some erotic exotics garbed in Mardi Gras costumes in San Francisco, and a few others, the visit of the pope was received with an affection and enthusiasm which surely strengthened the Church. Our bishops affirmed their fidelity to the Holy See. Authentic religious affirmed their obedience. Despite the jeremiads forecast from so much of the media, the laity manifested a love and devotion for the Holy Father which pervades the Church in the United States.

Q: But such an expense. Don't you think that the money the trip cost should have been given to the poor?

A: That was the worry of Judas over the pouring of the expensive perfume on Jesus. Among other things, the gigantic work in producing these great manifestations gave a great deal of work to the poor. The poor share in and enjoy these grand events as they share in the beauty of great cathedrals and art. What do you think would be the reaction of these carpenters to the following announcement: "There will be a second collection next week for the poor — and dig deep?" Those who love God are glad to shell out for His glory, and the papal visit was for God's glory.

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