

Columnists

An inspiring trip to Wayland

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Awhile back, Father Paul Schnacky of Wayland, brother of the late Monsignor Al Schnacky, called to ask me if I could substitute for him October 17 though 25, so that he could take an opportunity to visit Rome and Medjugorje.

It seems that a local Dr. Dolan has a daughter married to a Yugoslavian man, and she lives in the area of Medjugorje. The doctor wanted to visit her, and knowing Father Schnacky's interest in Medjugorje, invited him to go along on a week's trip beginning with Rome. Father Al Shamon of Auburn was to come for the first part of the trip, and I would take over when he left.

Let me tell you of the 11 a.m. Family Mass. Many parents with scads of little ones nearly filled the long church. Just before the Scripture readings, some 40 youngsters from age 2 to 6 left the parents like at a resurrection and trotted or skipped down the aisles into the sacristy. There, a special children's liturgy was conducted by an exceptional CCD director, Nancy Goodrich. After the adults' liturgy of the word and the homily, neither of which mean much to little children, they came bouncing back, beaming to their parents.

At the Lord's Prayer, more than 50 children bounced up around the altar and formed a semicircle with me at the center. We all held hands while reciting the prayer. Then, at the sign of peace, each child came to me for a hug, and contentedly jogged back to the parents to stay until the end of Mass.

Father Schnacky had left directions: At the end of Mass, I was to stand before the altar and give the children copies of their own Sunday church paper. Again, there was a mild stampede as the children came forward to get the papers, which would be read and discussed by the children and parents at home. I was touched by a little boy who looked up anxiously: "Can I have another for my father?" It seems to me that the effort to strengthen family life was working well. This did not happen overnight, however; it is the result of years of patient kindness and planning by an unusual pastor.

Friday, Oct. 23, was the 20th anniversary of

On the Right Side

the death of the former pastor, Monsignor Schneider. When I began his anniversary Mass at 9 a.m., Mrs. Schubmell, the third-grade teacher, was shepherding her class to the front pews. "What's going on?" I inquired. Mrs. Schubmell replied. "This is Monsignor Schneider's anniversary Mass, and we have his great-niece and great-nephew in our class." The two stood to be recognized.

All the children were alert, and I noted that at the Gospel, each carefully signed forehead, lips and heart with the sign of the cross. So we had a dialogue homily with the third grade. "I noticed you made the sign of the cross at the Gospel. What does that mean?" Nearly every child shot up an arm, anxious to respond. I called on the girl in the white sweater. "The cross on the forehead reminds us to understand the Gospel, on the lips to speak the Gospel, on the heart to love God's word."

After the Mass, Mrs. Schubmell kept the children and catechized them on the meaning of the paintings and the statues at the shrines. They still have votive candles. Painted on the ceiling over the altar is a picture of the crucifixion with the dove. When I asked, the children pressed forward to explain the meaning of the Holy Spirit, which brings love and peace and enthusiasm of the faith.

Greatly impressed, I said to Mrs. Schubmell, "I have never found a class so understanding of the faith. You are to be commended." With over-modesty, since she is known as an exceptionally fine teacher, she said, "The credit really goes to Sister Stanislaus Marie and the second-grade teacher Lynette McAllister, who prepared them for first penance and first Communion last year."

Thanks be to God for a Catholic school where the Catholic faith is central.

The ex-Catholic syndrome

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Ex-Catholics generally fall into one or more of 10 categories. They are Catholics who:

1) married outside of the Church back in the days when the penalty was excommunication; 2) married non-Catholics and later switched over to their spouses' denominations; 3) were divorced and later remarried. (Marriage-related problems — items 1-3 — are probably at the root of the great majority of departures from the Catholic Church);

4) had unresolved difficulties with some doctrine or other and who left the Church as a matter of intellectual honesty; (A relatively tiny number, one would suspect.); 5) had a bad experience with a priest or a nun; 6) had been actively wooed by Protestant fundamentalist and pentecostalist groups (There are thousands upon thousands in this category.);

7) were disillusioned and upset about the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council (a number much smaller than some conservatives would have us believe); 8) were disillusioned and upset about the slow pace of change since Vatican II (a number much smaller than some liberals would have us believe, but still larger than the preceding category);

9) were excommunicated for reasons other than marriage, e.g.; procuring "a successful abortion;"

10) simply grew careless about the practice of their faith, and, because of an inadequate religious education, had little or no "spring-back" capabilities (This is probably a very substantial number, rivalling 1-3 and 6).

How do all of these ex-Catholics relate to the Church they left behind? For some, undoubtedly, their original connection with the Church was so tenuous that it now plays little or no role at all in their thoughts, attitudes and behavior. This would be especially true of those in category 10.

Others are afflicted with irregular bouts of nostalgia, but of a romantic rather than a theologically substantive kind. There might be an occasional Mass at Christmas, just for old times' sake.

A distressingly large number, I would guess, have unpleasant memories of and negative feelings toward the Church — some of those in so-called "bad marriages," almost all of those who had seriously unpleasant experiences with priests or nuns and many of those dislocated by Vatican II.

Essays in Theology

These people manifest very different reactions to the Church. Some slammed the door behind them and have never looked back. Only rarely will the subject of Catholicism even come up, and then quickly dropped. Others, however, can't stop talking about the Church; they seem obsessed with it. They will tell you again and again how they used to be Catholic and why they left. With only a little encouragement, they will pull out their faded laundry list of complaints.

Those who have nurtured their conflict with the Church view the current intramural debates among practicing Catholics with avid interest and, if the truth be told, with much anxiety. The reform movements and the progressive activists in today's Catholic Church unsettle them more than you might think. Indeed, one suspects that they are relieved by the pope's hard-line on doctrine, discipline and morality.

Why? Because the reforms and the reformers are a threat to their ex-Catholic status. They left the Church — once and for all, they thought — because they perceived it to be narrow, unbending, severe, censorious, out-of-state. Today they see a Church that shows occasional, even frequent, signs of being vibrant, dynamic, open, flexible, changing and, above all, self-critical.

The pope, ironically, reassures them. After listening to him, they conclude that today's Church is still the same old Church they quit — strict about sex, unyielding on marriage rules, intolerant of independent thought and insensitive to the gender gap.

They expect those who accept Catholicism's benefits — a life hereafter, the comforts of forgiveness, peace of mind — to pay the price of fidelity to all the Church's teachings. In other words, if you're intellectually uncritical enough to be a Catholic, then be an uncritical Catholic. After all, is there any other kind?

Yes, there is, and that poses a real challenge to every ex-Catholic out there.

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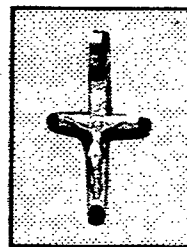
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