

Columnists

Erosion, diversion and statistics

By Father Paul J. Cuddy
Auburnian Father William Bergan taught us English at St. Andrew's Seminary in 1928. He made us memorize many things, including the whole of Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven." I hated memorizing, but am grateful that he made us do what we would not have done otherwise.

One of the things I read was a quotation attributed to Mark Twain concerning lies. "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies and statistics." We are flooded with statistics, but how reliable they are is often questionable.

Recently, I read three articles on Catholics leaving the Church. One, in the December Our Sunday Visitor by Bishop Norbert F. Gaughan, is entitled "Someone better watch the back door." Bishop Gaughan believes the process that brings about departure is called "secularization." He claims: "More than heresy, it is eroding our American society as well as England, that body we call the Church. While many busy themselves about evangelization and want to bring the message to those who do not believe in God, SOMEBODY HAD BETTER WATCH THE BACK DOOR."

Father Andrew Greeley begins his article in the August 1 issue of America this way: "The question is no longer why Catholics leave, but why they stay." This skirts the question of departure, and Father Greeley develops the theory that statistics show that — despite dismal claims of a substantial exodus from the Church — Catholics remain Catholics.

Listing a litany of grievances, Father Greeley claims: "Catholics stay despite enormous aggravations — poor preaching, inept and tyrannical pastors, bishops using funerals to talk about politics, poor preaching, tactless priests, poor preaching, money sermons, poor preaching, and almost every other dumb and insensitive thing ingenuity can devise. Poor preaching, too?"

Yet despite this litany, Father Greeley concludes that Catholics stay anyway, with a strong consciousness of Catholic identity, even as one identifies oneself as an American. He concludes: "The Eucharist is the key to

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all: IDENTITY (We are the ones who go to Mass), COMMUNITY (The Mass is priest and parish together) and SACRAMENTALITY (When you receive Communion, you assert the goodness of the flesh and the world) ... The Eucharist is the key to all, but only the Eucharist rescued from petty historicism ... of the liturgists, from illiterate readers, off-key singers and dreadful homilies?"

In December's New Covenant, Father Michael Kolar, president of the National Evangelization Teams, writes: "We're losing the next generation." He ascribes the loss to family breakdown, including so many latch-key children, and the idol of sports and outside activities, which take the children from home and hearth. "Absentee parents, youth culture, unceasing rounds of outside diversions have destroyed millions of families. Young people have the television and one another. The peer group and the media make the crucial decisions for anxious teen-agers."

Father Phil Billotte, our assistant at Webster, recently directed a Search program, a weekend of spirituality, at the Rotary Sunshine Camp near Rochester. Six post-high school youngsters gave personal witness to the faith; some 20 adults came to take care of the cooking, serving and supervising; six priests came to assist with confessions; and 44 high school students from our parish made the Search and returned aglow to the parish, enthusiastic about the faith, with plans for the future.

It interests me that practically all the high school students came from families that have a healthy concern about their children and realize that life is not just fun and games, but is centered on Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives.

Brewing an anti-conservative backlash

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Recently, a cloud no bigger than an adult's hand has appeared on the religious horizon. It's already generating enough worry to prompt a few people to begin loading up on supplies before the storm finally hits.

Something is happening on the American religious scene that should give pause to every right-wing Protestant and Catholic, and new hope to moderates and progressives of every denomination and tradition.

In recent weeks, at least six Southern Baptist state conventions have thrown fundamentalist rascals out on their ears: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Georgia provides the most dramatic example. Intense right-wing pressures had been building against Mercer University, a Baptist-affiliated school. A campaign had been launched to cut its budget and take control of its faculty hiring process. Complaints focused on the administration's permissive attitude toward students and a lack of regard for orthodoxy in the classroom. An editorial review board was also created to function as a watchdog over the editorial policies of the state's Baptist newspaper. The editor resigned.

The complaints against Mercer University have been of the same sort one has heard in recent years concerning Catholic universities and seminaries: too liberal, morally lax and not faithful to traditional doctrine.

But the ideologues seem finally to have gone too far. More moderate elements in the Southern Baptist community had had enough of their slander and meanness. They struck back. Several resolutions were passed at the Georgia convention, restoration support for Mercer. The editorial review board was abolished.

These unexpected victories prompted moderates to put up a last-minute candidate for conference president against the fundamentalist incumbent. The odds against success had originally seemed overwhelming. Not in 166 years had a sitting president of the Georgia state conference been denied re-election to a second term. The moderate won.

In North Carolina, a moderate placed in nomination by the resigned president of South-

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eastern Seminary decisively defeated a fundamentalist. Moderates achieved similar victories in Louisiana, Mississippi and North Carolina. Texas Baptists elected a new president supported by both moderates and fundamentalists. But they also elected two moderates as first and second vice presidents.

The tide may be turning. Jerry Falwell, laboring under one of the highest negative ratings in public-opinion polls, has just announced his withdrawal from the political arena. Pat Robertson has turned back his ministerial credentials to run less encumbered for the presidency of the United States. The televangelists generally have suffered a serious loss of credibility — and funds.

Similar developments have been occurring on the political side of the line. The Reagan Revolution came to an end last November with the Iran-Contra revelations and the loss of the U.S. Senate to the Democrats.

The end of the revolution is nowhere more dramatically apparent than in the strident criticisms of Mr. Reagan — sometimes masked as criticisms of chief-of-staff Howard Baker — from his erstwhile supporters on the right. They are already looking wistfully ahead to a possible, though highly unlikely, Jack Kemp administration.

But the next administration, Republican or Democratic, will be more moderate and less ideologically oriented than this one, and the right-wing knows it. It is no coincidence that right-wing religion flourishes in a right-wing political climate.

The U.S. political climate is changing once again. And that's why the more enterprising members of the religious right are buying emergency provisions on the sly.

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