

Columnists

A message for a young priest

By Father Paul J. Cuddy
Nearly 20 years ago I wrote this letter to a newly ordained priest, and wish to share it:
"Dear Father,

"The Courier-Journal carried the word of your assignment, and next Thursday you will present yourself to the pastor to assist him in the care of all the souls within your parish.

"Welcome to the fraternity of the priesthood! Your youth reminds me that I am old enough to be your grandfather. Your health, your zeal, your knowledge, your piety, your good humor, your resiliency give me the greatest joy. We who are trudging toward the shadows love you young priests greatly, both for yourselves as God loves you and for the Church which has such great hopes in you.

"I am smiling as I imagine your thoughts about your pastor and your people. If arriving assistants have some wonderment what the pastor is like, receiving pastors are frequently wondering about the assistant — before, during and afterward.

"I recall one pastor who was amused and started to be addressed as 'Bill' by his grand new curate, a good young priest filled with the idea of brotherhood. You are brothers in Christ — but so are you and your father whom, I hope, you address as a son to a father. And so is Bishop Sheen whom, I hope you won't address as 'Fultie' as brotherly as we are, there is a distinction in age and position which you will not regret to have remembered in the years to come.

"If you wonder what the people will be like, imagine their curiosity about you! All priests differ in gifts and talents. There is the CYO type, the organizer type and, occasionally, the disorganized type. There is the inner-city type, the turtle-neck-sweater type, the cassock type. But these are all incidental. First of all your people need and want a priest who honors his own priesthood. They need and want a man who has reverence for the Mass, who is a man of prayer, wholists more than he talks and who is manfully kind.

"There is a fad, at least I hope it is, of discounting the Breviary. May I tell you a story? One Saturday morning about 10, almost 15 years ago, the phone rang in my quarters at Lackland Air Force Base. An urgent voice said: 'This is Captain X. I just arrived at the base as a directly commissioned officer. Can I see you at once?' 'Of course' I said. 'Come to my

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quarters! He came promptly. He said: 'Father, I am a priest from X diocese. I got tired of my priesthood, and since I have a good educational background and several degrees, I got a direct commission in the Air Force in education. Now that I'm here I'm not sure what I want. If I should want to, would it be possible to be transferred to the chaplaincy?'

"I wondered how a priest could possibly get tired of the Mass, of serving God's people, of the holiness and mystery of the priesthood. He had none of the usual reasons for running away — namely wine, women or song.

"But every man is free, so I said: 'I'm glad you came over. Of course only you can decide what you will do. I surely hope you will return to your priesthood. In the meantime, I suppose it might cause wonderment if you say your Breviary prayers, but I hope you will say your rosary every day.'

"He replied with a trace of challenge: 'I haven't said the Breviary in years. I'm not likely to begin now!'

"I have often speculated on the connection between the omission of the Breviary prayers, pledged for the Church and the people, and his defection. Only God knows, but as a result of his default, rather than using even reasonable excuses for failing to recite the Breviary prayers each day, I have considered it a grace to want to be faithful to these prayers. May you have the same grace.

"Whatever gifts you have in serving God's people, I give thanks to God that you have the goodness to use them. However, above all things, be reverent toward the Mass, faithful to your Breviary, regular with your rosary, and take a little time each day for some meditation.

"My time is running out, but I am happy to leave this world knowing there are men like you: zealous, devout, cheerful, faithful, bursting with a love of God and Our Lady and the Church which is Christ's Body. God continues to give you His grace and happiness."

Two views of the papal character

By Father Richard P. McBrien
In a recent review of 'The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater' by Karol Wojtyla — that's Pope John Paul II, for those who had too much holiday cheer — Stanislaw Baranczak, professor of Polish language and literature at Harvard University, suggests that these plays "illuminate the character of this pope — particularly his openmindedness, so seldom comprehended by those who are unwilling to see behind the rigid facade of the institution he represents" (The New Republic, 12/14/87, p. 48).

"Open-minded? The pope?" Professor Baranczak writes, anticipating the reaction of many readers. "I won't be surprised if I hear a roar of protest."

Then he referred to the pope's recent visit to the United States, and what he believes to have been a superficial assessment in the media of the man as "a Great Communicator and a great guy, or a reactionary bogeyman who denies the benefits of progress to women and gays."

"Behind those flat images," Baranczak concluded, "an infinitely more complex personality waits to be discovered. What we usually see is John Paul the former actor. We should see John Paul the former playwright — someone for whom theater means not so much showmanship as dialogue.

"The mind of man for whom theater has been a primary means of expression can hardly be dogmatic. Even when he has shifted from plays to encyclicals, his outlook is still imbued with his recognition of the world's dramatic plurality."

One finds a different view in Martin Marty's "Good Pope and the Stern Pope" (The Christian Century, 10/14/87). "Good Pope John Paul II was almost Jesus like on his recent American tour whenever he dealt with the powerless. The images that endure found him at his best with those he saw as poor, oppressed, exiled, disabled or victimized," Marty wrote.

"Severe Pope John Paul II, on the same tour, was scribal and scolding whenever he encountered people he perceived as powerful. He operated with a mental hierarchy that left another set of images.

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"He was hardest, in descending order, on the bishops, then the priests, the theologians, the nuns, the vocal laity — anyone he saw as having authority that might challenge his own, education that might lead to questioning, affluence that could distract, or any form of agency to enable such challengers to 'run things'.

"The good news about the good pope is that so much of the world is powerless, and so much of the Christian future is located among the people with whom he deals well. The stern news for the stern pope," Marty continued, "is that in America there are often constant efforts by the powerless to move past victimization, to become agents . . . Will, not achievements move them out of his favored ranks and give him an ever smaller cohort for support of his policies and interpretations?"

"Before the pope came, it was natural to say that as a Pole from a monolithic church, John Paul II did not understand the pluralism of America and its church.

"Now that the pope has gone, it is more appropriate to say that as a Vaticanist, seeking order and obedience, John Paul II does understand that pluralism. He wants to witness against it, draw communicants and citizens away from it, and recruit new followers to his vision of an obedient church that gives no space to dissenters, however loyal and respectful they may be.

How does this view square with Professor Baranczak's assurance that the "playwright's natural element, after all, is dialogue," and that John Paul's "outlook is still imbued with his recognition of the world's dramatic plurality?"

Marty at least acknowledges two sides of this "infinitely . . . complex personality." Professor Baranczak acknowledges only one. He's not alone in that.

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This young man in China came to know that good news through missionaries serving there. Worldwide, missionaries enable others to make the promise this young man (although not so new in years) makes as he is baptized.
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Start the new year off right! Keep an old new-year's resolution!

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