

Columnists

# An awesome, blessed calling

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Years ago, I read the biography of some minor English poet. Strangely enough, I remember the author of the biography, *Oliver*, but not the name of the subject of the biography. The one thing that remains in my memory is that the poet was a convert to the Catholic faith and a strong adherent to the Church. But he lived on an island where there was only one Catholic church and one priest.

The poet and the pastor had a vast disagreement, and from that day on, the poet disliked all priests. He continued, however, to have the greatest reverence for the priesthood. This, of course, is correct reasoning. We must always make the distinction between the person and the personality of the priest, and the terrible gift he has by reason of ordination — the priesthood.

In 1940, I was stationed in Ithaca at the downtown parish of Immaculate Conception. About 10 p.m. Good Friday, the telephone rang. Over the phone came the raucous din from a jukebox, the tinkling of glasses and bottles, the shouting of voices trying to talk over the racket. The somber memories from the Good Friday devotions were in deep contrast to the sounds of the local pub.

The caller was a woman, who with a sweet-some voice was requesting money or transportation to Cortland. The voice was well-preserved in alcohol, and was struggling to compete with the noise in the pub. Suddenly the voice pleading for assistance stopped. The noise of the pub habitués came through clearly in her sudden silence. Then, like the explosion of a giant firecracker, the sweet voice screamed to a female companion: "Shut up, you wench! Don't you see I'm talking to the priest?"

Now, considering that it was Good Friday evening — when most Christians have quiet thoughts, reflecting on the events of Calvary — this boozey woman, clinking glasses, jukebox and the shouting of the patrons all seemed in strange contrast to calling a priest at the

# On the Right Side

Geneva Street rectory.

However, one point stands out. Our Lord said to the Pharisees: "I came not to call the righteous but the sinner. He who is well needs not the physician, but he who is sick." Even in her confused state, the caller did recognize that a priest is a man set apart, that he is a special instrument to bring holiness and compassion. Years ago, a father said to his newly ordained son: "Son, never forget what you are." He did not instruct his son to remember *who* he was, but *what* he was, namely a priest.

When we were ordained to the priesthood, we knew we were being given awesome powers, graces and responsibilities. No man is worthy of the priesthood. But God calls men through the successors of the apostles, namely the bishops. And the bishop says during the ordination rite: "One does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, as Aaron was." To the question, "What is a priest?" Pius XI wrote: "The priest is another Christ, since he enacts His role according to these words: 'As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. . . Such powers are not fleeting and transitory, but stable and permanent. The priest, if he will faithfully comply with these heavenly gifts by his free cooperation, will be able worthily and with no dejection of spirit, to meet the hard duties of the priesthood.'"

How beautifully Lacordaire described the priesthood: "To be a member of every family, yet belong to none; to teach and instruct; to pardon and console; to bless and be blessed forever! O God, what a life, and it is thine, O priest of Jesus Christ!"

# A closer look at the pope's teachings

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Pope John Paul II's new encyclical, "The Social Concern of the Church" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), will not be welcomed by Catholics who: 1) have persuaded themselves that the pope doesn't agree with the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letters on peace and the economy and is actually far more conservative than the bishops are on these matters; 2) view the world as divided between good and evil, with the United States and its allies on the side of good and the Soviet Union and its allies as "The Evil Empire;" 3) see no moral problem at all with our individual and national habits of consumption, claiming that we earned our wealth and are entitled to spend it as we like; 4) believe that Catholic social teachings have no religious content or significance; and 5) have loudly insisted — especially during the controversy over Father Curran — that unquestioning loyalty to the pope and his teachings is the mark of a true Catholic.

The pope's encyclical is actually to the left of the U.S. bishops' pastoral on peace and the economy. The bishops, for example, never placed the so-called Free World on par with the Soviet bloc, as the pope does. You find that hard to believe? Read the text. And then, by way of confirmation, sample some of the strongly negative reviews the encyclical has received already from the political right.

This new encyclical is also to the left of the U.S. bishops' pastoral on the economy. Pope John Paul II is much harder on capitalism, with its "all-consuming desire for profit," than are the bishops. The encyclical says that our capitalistic system, just as surely as the Marxist system, has its own forms of propaganda and indoctrination. And, it asserts, these are buttressed by military power, with an inherent tendency toward imperialism and neo-colonialism.

The pope's encyclical directly challenges our rapacious accumulation of goods and services, made possible by what he calls a "superdevelopment" fostered by science and technology, including the computer sciences.

"This superdevelopment," the encyclical asserts "which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, easily makes

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people slaves of 'possession' and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better."

Pope John Paul II makes very clear that Catholic social teachings — specifically those teachings concerned with economic justice, human rights, and peace — have to do with the Gospel and with the Christian life. He calls Catholic social doctrine "the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition.

"Its main aim is to interpret these realities," the document continues, "determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on humanity and its vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology."

Politically and economically conservative people, including Catholics, do not like Catholic social teachings. Those teachings are a direct threat to their self-esteem and net worth alike. So they dismiss the teachings as "political" or "naive" or "marxist" or "papal obiter dicta," to use William F. Buckley's expression.

But Catholics who feel this way cannot continue to insist, on the one hand, that the test of Catholic orthodoxy is unquestioning acceptance of the pope's teachings of the pope and, on the other hand, ignore or even oppose papal teachings on economics and the world order.

If you can ignore or oppose the pope on economics and politics, why can't you also ignore or oppose him on *in-vitro* fertilization or on contraception?



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