

Columnists

## Fidelity to genuine ecumenism

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Since Vatican II, there has been much talk about ecumenism. Genuine ecumenism is not based on a sell-out of the faith, but in a sincere regard for those who are not Catholics. It includes working with them in social matters. In some respects it includes praying together, but not in sharing the Eucharist. The Church clearly directs that the Eucharist is reserved for those who are in the union of the faith, and in communion with the universal Church. Dreadful abuses have been perpetrated in the name of ecumenism. The regulations about the Eucharist had become so banded about by some priests and sisters that the American bishops ordered that the regulations be published every Sunday in the missalettes used by most parishes.

Before Vatican II, I was a genuine ecumenist, thanks to my time in the military service, where we military people of many religions lived together in religious harmony, respecting the sincerity of one another but not compromising our own religious convictions.

Because genuine ecumenism is part of our Catholic mission, when I was ending my 10-year pastorate of the Clyde-Savannah parishes, I used to send an occasional letter to some hundred non-Catholics in the area. Here is one of June, 1967:

"To our separated brothers, greetings,  
"Have you wondered at times why you receive an occasional letter from me, a priest in Clyde? Have you wondered even more when sometimes the letter that came to you didn't seem to have anything to do with your religious life or your politics or economics? Have you suspected that I was trying to corral you into the Catholic Church? Well, if you did, it was quite a false suspicion. The following little joke will help you to understand what I really have in mind.

"There was a man who had a very large lawn. It was constantly afflicted with dandelions. He tried all kinds of weed killer, but to no avail. Finally he wrote to the state agriculture college and asked for advice. Ten days later, he had a nice note from the college, which read: 'Dear Sir, Regarding your problem with dandelions, we suggest that you learn to love

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them. Sincerely yours.."

"Since we are living together, forming one community of Clyde and Savannah, I think it is important that you know and understand what makes Catholics tick. One thing you will note about us: whether they are good or band, church-goers or not, loyal to the Church or undermining her, deep in their souls they believe in the Catholic faith, they do hold their priests as special and, in danger of death, most want every grace they know the Church can give. One day I visited a man in the hospital. He was away from the Church for 57 years. He was very sick. I said: 'You are a very sick man. Do you want to go to confession and holy Communion, and return to the Church?' He said: 'Indeed I do. Thank you.' And he did.

"Father Francis Burns, a professor at St. Bernard's Seminary, said to our class in 1933: 'Know all you can about your people. The better you know them, the better you can serve them.'

"Perhaps if you know us better, you will love us better and understand what makes us tick. I do hope so. Sincerely yours ..."

Genuine ecumenism is based on a great love for our separated brothers and sisters, a great sorrow that we are not one in faith and sacraments, a gratefulness that they do share — in varying degrees — the teachings of our Lord, and a hope that many years ahead the unity that Christ longed for will come to pass. Meanwhile, the "instant ecumenists" should ponder the words from Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism: "Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false conciliatory approach which harms the purity of Catholic doctrine and obscures its assured genuine meaning" (#11).

## Learning from Jimmy Swaggart

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Healthy people know instinctively when criticism has crossed the line of civility, sanity and even good fun. They become uncomfortable in the presence of such criticism, precisely because they are healthy.

One doesn't have to be a theologian or a preacher to recognize that there was something excessive, and therefore unhealthy, about televangelist Jimmy Swaggart's weekly denunciations of sin, especially of sex-related sin. He seemed obsessed with sins of the flesh — adultery, homosexuality, pornography — and his condemnations were laden with anger, resentment and self-righteousness. Healthy people winced.

It's not that healthy people are apologists for sexual perversion. Healthy people believe in marital fidelity and are profoundly concerned about the sexual promiscuity of contemporary society. And while they may be compassionate and understanding toward homosexuals, wanting the law to treat them fairly, healthy people regard the condition of the homosexual as tragic and unhappy.

But the Swaggart approach was something else again. It is one thing to be concerned about sins of the flesh and to do whatever you can, especially by way of example, to counteract the power such sins hold over the lives of others. But it is quite another matter to talk about nothing else.

Healthy people are wary of those who are always denouncing certain kinds of behavior. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (*Hamlet*).

The fictional Elmer Gantry is by now an established part of our culture. We recognize him in the real-life preacher caught committing the sin he has most vigorously condemned. Jimmy Swaggart is only one example, of course, but he is hardly an exception to the rule.

There is no disposition here to heap further abuse upon Jimmy Swaggart's head or to cluck triumphantly over his terrible plight. But neither can we afford to ignore the lesson the Swaggart case has to teach us.

Healthy people are against sin and try their best, with God's grace, to avoid committing sin. But healthy people aren't obsessed with sin. They know it coexists with goodness and grace, and that goodness and grace are more

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powerful. And so healthy people can think and talk and even laugh about other things — many other things, in fact. Not so for unhealthy people. The way they deal with their own demons is to snarl at the demons they see in others.

If that's true in matters of sex, it's also true in matters of faith. Healthy Christians are men and women of faith. But they don't talk constantly about it. They believe it's more important to practice their faith — with strength and courage, to be sure, but also humbly and without fanfare.

The faith of a healthy Christian doesn't depend on the censuring of a dissident theologian or the shaming of a pastorally innovative bishop. The healthy Christian's faith originated neither in the theology nor in the hierarchy. It was, and is, a gift of God. More than that, it is a virtue or a power, as are hope and charity.

What, then, are we to say of those who thunder constantly about orthodoxy, about felonious raids upon the deposit of faith, about the need for absolute certitude and an absolute authority to ensure it?

About the same thing we say about people who rail all the time against sins of the flesh. Is it so unreasonable to suggest that those most obsessed with orthodoxy may be — deep down — tormented by doubts about their own faith and that, far from being secure in their faith, they are just hanging on to it by their fingernails?

Jimmy Swaggart was eventually caught in the company of a prostitute. The vociferous defender of orthodoxy, if caught, will be in the company of demon Doubt.

No photographs, please. Only compassion and understanding, even for those who, in their self-contempt, could only spew out angry and hurtful words against their fellow Christians. What appears as malice is really a cry of pain.



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Dr. Max Myers  
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- 530 Contemporary Biblical Interpretation (2 credits)  
Dr. Donald Swanson  
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Dr. Joseph Hart  
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In the foothills of the Alleghenies

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