

Columnists

Pagans with a Catholic veneer

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

From a distressed aunt:

Recently I went to Long Island for a nephew's First Communion. Father, what has happened? Where did we go wrong in failing to communicate the spiritual joy in receiving one of the greatest sacraments in our lives? The celebration used to have meaning. Grandparents, aunts and uncles gathered and beamed approval, and the day was one to remember and treasure. If Kevin's was an example, God help us! Mass was attended by 11 of us, relatives and friends. After that it was chaos.

Several men went to find an Off Track Betting parlor because of the Kentucky Derby. At the house, everyone awaited the arrival of 40 guests, and the booze began to flow. (Don't remind me of Cana — or do you think there is a parallel?) It was a cocktail party, halting momentarily for Kevin to open his gifts. Two nuns and I gave religious articles. Everyone else gave money — and I mean DOLLARS. Over \$800. I wish I hadn't been there.

Comment: In an article in the October 10, 1987, edition of America, entitled, "P.T. Barnum and the Catechetical Quest: Ten Commandments for religious educators," the talented and tempestuous Father William O'Malley, SJ, incised his bombastic, incisive and wise thoughts on catechetics. I wish America would publish the article as a pamphlet. It would profit teachers of religion, whether in Catholic schools, CCD classes, adult education, or in the pulpit.

Father O'Malley taught students at McQuaid Jesuit High School until his transfer to Fordham Prep in the Bronx last year. Once, when he was taking me over the coals for an article I had written on the value of the catechism, he informed me — as if I needed reminding — that modern students are pagans with a veneer of Catholicism.

In his October article in America, Father O'Malley reiterated that thought, writing: "Most of our students are polite, well-groomed pagans with Christian labels. They are motivated, for instance, in their choice of careers by values no different than from those of the pseudo-atheist students in the public school down the street."

Again Father O'Malley wrote: "Jesus

On the Right Side

wasn't a speculative theology teacher. He was going for the heart. Therefore, a good part of our efforts must go into finding ways for our students to experience God and community. Without discovering God through prayer and retreats, all our classes are as academic as unadorned facts to be memorized, and about as likely to affect the personal lives of those whom we teach. Our task is not simply to challenge the mind. Our task is also to move the heart."

As dismal as this seems, there are silver linings. In the many parishes where I have served in this diocese, there are splendid young men and women who are Christian Catholics to the core: faithful in doctrine, edifying in practice. Does our problem lie in the fact that we do not challenge them to nobility and sacrifice? Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity flourish. The Terras's Missionaries of Charity flourish — both tough outfits — get vocations. A Weedsport collegian is returning to Appalachia to serve the poor for a year. A Mercy student has just returned from working in Mexico with the Jesuit Volunteers, appalled at the poverty and quickened in her religion.

There are many such cases. But the going is rough among parents who secularize First Communion, weddings and baptisms. I asked a parent of a Catholic high school student: "How would you evaluate the school?" The answer came: "academics, very good; social values, very good; religion, well that needs strengthening."

How many of the parents of students at McQuaid Jesuit High School or any Catholic high school are genuine Catholics? How many are pagans with a veneer of Catholicism, who want their children to have a solid academic education, but are little concerned about their souls?

An ad limina challenge to bishops

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 6:30-34; (R1) Jeremiah 23:1-6; (R2) Ephesians 2:13-18.

An American priest was traveling by train through Ireland. At one stop, Bishop O'Dwyer of Limerick was standing on the platform, waiting for another train. He noticed the priest smoking and remarked: "My dear Father, your smoking in public scandalizes the Irish people."

"I don't see much scandal in smoking a good cigar," countered the priest. "And who might you be?"

"I am Bishop O'Dwyer of Limerick," was the answer.

A bit taken aback, the priest looked respectfully at the bishop, and then as the train slowly moved away, he remarked, "You have a fine job. Take good care of it."

Bishops do have fine "jobs." They are the successors of the apostles. Their work is sacred and difficult. One of their duties is to make a quinquennial report directly to the pope (Canon 399).

Sunday's Gospel tells us that such reports began with Jesus: "The apostles returned to Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and what they had taught."

Every five years, bishops give a full and careful report to the Holy Father, the Vicar of Christ, on the condition of their dioceses, including their pastoral and administrative organizations, the general religious situation, economic conditions, the liturgy, clergy, education, ecumenism, the social apostolate, and so on.

This year happens to be the year for the bishops of the United States to make their quinquennial reports to the Holy Father. In this same year, in which the bishop is bound to make his report, he is also required to come, if possible, to Rome to venerate the tombs of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, and to appear before the Roman pontiff (Canon 400).

This is called the "ad limina" visit. Limina means lintel, threshold or door; hence coming to the threshold or home of the pope. Limina comes from the Latin word ligamen, meaning a tie or fastening. One of the purposes of the "ad limina" visit is to strengthen the bond between the pope and bishops throughout the world.

A Word for Sunday

The Holy Father asked the third group of U.S. bishops making their "ad limina" visit to Rome this year for some pastoral action on the sacrament of reconciliation. On May 31, 1988, addressing 20 bishops from Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama and the Archdiocese for the Military Services, Pope John Paul II said: "At this moment in the Church's life, both in the United States and throughout the world, it is opportune to reflect on the sacrament of penance with a view to reinforcing ... an organic pastoral approach to a matter of such supreme importance for the conversion and reconciliation of the world."

He went on to say: "The sacrament of penance is in crisis ... For the sacrament of confession is indeed being undermined." One of the reasons the sacrament is in crisis is the abuse of general absolution. So the Holy Father asked bishops to see that the gravis necessitas required for general absolution be truly understood in the sense explained by Canon 916.

The Holy Father continued: "... sporadic efforts are not enough to overcome the crisis. For this reason, I appeal today to you and through you to all the bishops of the United States for organic pastoral planning in each diocese to restore the sacrament of penance to its rightful place in the Church and to renew its use in full accordance with the intention of Christ"

This is a clear challenge to all bishops. It is a hard one — like trying to get toothpaste back into the tube — but it can be done. That it may, let us all pray fervently for our bishops whenever we pray the second Eucharistic Prayer at Mass: "Lord, remember your Church throughout the world; make us grow in love, together with John Paul, our pope, Matthew, our bishop, and all the clergy."

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