

Columnists

The New Testament law of love

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Sometimes you have to wonder how many Catholics there are who never read the New Testament or who don't even pay attention to the readings at Mass.

To hear some of them tell what it means to be a Catholic, Jesus must have been preoccupied with instilling loyalty to the pope, censuring dissident theologians, condemning most expressions of human sexuality, blessing military preparedness, and encouraging the accumulation of personal and corporate wealth.

In his spare time, he insisted that priests wear Roman collars, that nuns wear veils, and that children be forced to memorize lists of holy days of obligation, precepts of the Church, and, of course, the Ten Commandments. Meanwhile, Jesus himself was safely above all forms of human weakness and human temptation.

In their rendition of things, Jesus must have also spent a good deal of time developing various devotions to his own mother. And when he wasn't concentrating on Mary, he was probably urging his more militant followers to be brutally rough on anyone who failed to toe the line.

This version of Catholicism bears no resemblance to the New Testament, nor to the rich selection of readings we are given at Mass.

Jesus is himself subject to temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). He was like us in all things except sin. He could "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15).

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus praised the meek, those who work for justice, the merciful, and the peacemakers (Matthew 5:1-12).

He chastised those who become angry with their brothers, and told them not to come to the altar with gifts until they had been reconciled (5:21-24).

Neither can we judge one another lest we ourselves be judged. It is hypocritical to think that we are pure while only our neighbor is in sin (7:1-5).

Jesus also rejected revenge. We should "offer no resistance to one who is evil," he said (5:39). Indeed, we must be ready to forgive one another not seven times, but 70 times seven times (18:22), which means without limit.

But it is not enough to love our neighbor. Even the despised tax collectors love their families and their friends. We must also love our enemies (5:43-48).

One of the Lord's greatest concerns was our unhealthy fascination with money. Some people think that the more money you have, the more God has "blessed you." But Jesus warned us: "You cannot serve God and mammon (money)" (6:24).

Indeed, Jesus went even farther than that.

Essays in Theology

He said it would be "easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (19:24).

When reproached by the Pharisees for sitting at table with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (9:12-13).

And when his disciples were criticized for breaking the law by picking grain on the Sabbath, he defended them, citing the precedent of David, who went into the house of God on the Sabbath and ate the bread of offering — because he and his companions were hungry (12:1-8). In other words, human needs come before the mere observance of rules.

When he sent his disciples to go forth to preach the Gospel, he warned them not to take any gold or silver or copper, and to dress simply (10:5-15).

And when his disciples quarreled among themselves over who would have the highest places in the kingdom, Jesus scolded them because they were distorting the whole notion of authority. That's what the Gentiles do, he said, lording it over one another. "But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave" (20:20-28).

Furthermore, those who are in religious authority must never impose burdens on others that they themselves would not bear. Indeed, the most common sins of those in authority are self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and hardness of heart (see the whole of the 23rd chapter).

In the final accounting, there is only one law by which Jesus' disciples are to live: the law of love. We are to love God and to love our neighbor. "The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments" (22:40).

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

These are the sorts of "rules" and "laws" that one comes across on almost every page of the New Testament. On the other hand, one looks in vain for the "usual suspects" that get rounded up each time our censorious brethren decide to instruct the rest of us on what it means to be a good Catholic.

Tournaments

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weekend. Mike Johnston's Crusaders won their first-round game against Edison, 86-66, before losing to Corning East in the championship game, 84-67, on Saturday, Nov. 26.

The Crusaders had difficulty trying to offset the size and the experience of Corning East in the title game. Kevin Havens, a 6-foot-5 junior who has been playing high school basketball since the eighth grade, led four returning starters for Corning East with 27 points and 21 rebounds.

Elmira ND trailed 39-25 in the second quarter, until a 12-0 run pulled the Crusaders to within two points, 39-37, at intermission.

"I really felt good about the pressure we were

putting on them ... but they controlled the pressure in the second half," Johnston said.

Brian Sheehan led ND with 25 points, and Geoff Woodworth scored 17 points.

In its first-round win against Edison, Notre Dame roared out to a 40-28 lead at the half and never looked back. Mike Bernatavitz paced ND with 20 points as five Crusaders reached double figures in scoring. Woodworth had 16 points.

Sheehan and Woodworth were named to the all-tournament team, and Bernatavitz earned the "Mr. Hustle" award.

The Crusaders face a tough Windsor team in the first-round of the Windsor Tipoff tournament this Friday, Dec. 2. If ND gets by Windsor, it would face the winner of the other first-round game between Susquehanna Valley and Sidney.

Workshop focuses on families

The Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry is sponsoring an Advent workshop entitled "Families: Carrying the Good News into the World" Saturday, Dec. 3, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at St. Charles Borromeo Parish Hall, 130 Oakwood Ave., Elmira Heights.

The workshop is designed for family groups and will include a variety of presentations, simulation games and family activities focusing on the place of the family in modern society.

Participants must be at least six-years-old. For more information, contact Kathy Dubel of the Office of Social Ministry at 607/734-9784.

Sisters to discuss religious life

The Sisters of St. Joseph will hold a vocation reflection evening on Tuesday, Dec. 6, from 7:30 to 9 p.m. in the motherhouse, 4095 East Ave., Rochester.

The talk, entitled "Roots and Reasons — the

Sisters of St. Joseph," will be given by Sister Eileen Conheady, SSJ, project manager of Women's Place in Rochester and recipient of the Monroe County District Attorney's Office 1988 Distinguished Citizen Award, and Sister Catherine Heverin, director of religious education at St. Paul's, Webster.

For information about the seminar or two additional seminars to be held in the spring, or to schedule an interview with a vocation director, call Sister Barbara Lum or Sister Marilyn Pray at 716/586-1000, ext. 28.

Creative ability to be probed

The Mercy Prayer Center will offer an Advent reflection day focusing on pottery and meditation on Sunday, Dec. 4, from 1-6 p.m.

The day, to be directed by Ruth Hauser and Marie Fischette, will help participants explore their creative potential through the experience and meditation of the potter.

Cost for the day is \$5. For information, call Judith Vaeth at 716/473-6893.

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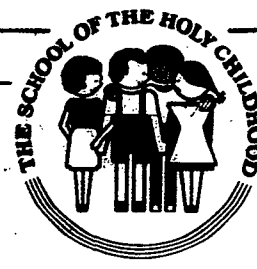
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