

Columnists

# The Church's trouble with priests

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Fifty years ago, a popular book explaining the Catholic religion was "Radio Replies," by Fathers Rumble and Carty. Father Rumble was a convert to the Church in Australia, and Father Carty co-authored as an American. For many years, Father Rumble ran a radio program from Sydney, Australia, explaining the faith and answering questions and objections sent in by listeners. So many objections were so similar that he decided to put them into categories — the Bible, the Pope, the Church, the Inquisition, the Eucharist, Our Lady, and so on — and publish them in question-and-answer form. There are three volumes, but Volume I covers most of the usual objections. The questions are frequently accusatory, from obviously misinformed listeners. His replies are frequently tart, but always concise and to the point.

Because of the book, Father Don Cleary, then chaplain of Cornell University, invited Father Rumble in 1940 to give a lecture on the faith at the university. He gave him visiting quarters at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Ithaca, where Father Robert Kress and I were assistants. The author was a delight in the house, with touches of humor and wisdom and humaneness which gladdened us during his stay.

One day, while describing his radio apostolate in Australia, he said: "Each Sunday I would give an hour's talk on some subject, and people wrote in their reactions, which were nearly always belligerent objections to Catholic teaching and practices. I would answer the objections through the radio and end each program with the invitation: 'If you are interested in knowing more about the Catholic faith, just go to the nearest rectory and the priest there will welcome you and your enquiry.'"

"One day a young man came to our rectory and asked for instructions. I enquired where he lived. He mentioned a village over 100 miles away. I said: 'That's a long way off. Why don't you go to the parish priest there?' He replied: 'I did.' My throat tightened as I asked: 'Oh. And what happened?' He said: 'I rang the doorbell of the rectory and a big Irish priest came and asked what I wanted. I said: 'I want to take instructions in the Catholic religion.' He said: 'How old are you?' I said: 'Nineteen, sir.' Then he said: 'What religion have you had?' I said: 'Anglican.' Then he said: 'If you have been an Anglican for 19 years, you might as well continue. Good day!' And he shut the door."

# The makings of a good year

By Father Richard P. McBrien

- The year 1989 will be a good year if ...
- the Eucharist becomes even more than now the center of our lives as Catholics.
  - most Eucharistic presiders and preachers make us eager to participate fully in the liturgy — and find ways of helping us to do so.
  - we are moved somehow to imitate the compassion, the mercy, the spirit of forgiveness and the sense of justice of Jesus Christ.
  - we recognize that private charity is no substitute for social justice and social justice is no substitute for private charity — and we practice both.
  - all candidates for the ordained priesthood seek it for the service they can provide rather than the status they can enjoy.
  - women at every pastoral level are treated as equal partners in the life and mission of the Church.
  - all those who work for the Church, especially lay people, are justly compensated.
  - those who have felt themselves alienated from the Church — including divorced-and-remarrieds, gays and resigned priests — feel reconciled anew.
  - all those who aspire to higher ecclesiastical office are disappointed.
  - all those who have abused their religious authority acknowledge it, ask pardon and make a firm purpose of amendment.
  - the Vatican appoints a few archbishops who are warmly welcomed by the priests and other pastoral ministers of the archdioceses to which they are assigned.
  - the Vatican circulates important draft documents that make bishops and theologians alike sit up and take notice.
  - efforts to produce a universal catechism make no headway.
  - the penalty of silence is lifted from Father Matthew Fox, and the quality of his work is left for the "market" to decide.
  - Bible-reading among Catholics dramatically increases, while fundamentalism declines.
  - the Vatican and the bishops issue no statements related to sex — either for or against.

# On the Right Side

"From that time on, I discontinued the finale of the radio broadcast: 'If you are interested in further knowledge of the Catholic religion, go to the nearest rectory.'"

Some years ago I knew an old patriarch who was a strong Catholic with a deep devotion to the Church. However he also had a tendency to be arbitrary, and had a history of conflicts with every pastor of his parish. He used to say: "There's nothing wrong with the Church. The Church is divine and is from God. The trouble is with the priests!" Even during his frequent conflicts with the pastors, he was faithful to Mass, supported the Church, and was edifyingly devoted to the Church. I thought of him as I recalled the Irish priest in Australia who shut the door on the young man who sought admission to the Church.

It is true that there are priests who have a peculiar personality which is contrary to their vocation. But to say "the trouble is with the priests" is as fatuous as to indict any group: doctors, civil servants, teachers — all sharing the same human nature, with diverse personalities.

There have always been, and there will always be problem people. The fact that perhaps 5 percent of priests are problems leaves 95 percent who are not, who are serving their people with varying degrees of generosity and efficiency. If you were a bishop, what would you do with the 5 percent who, despite their peculiarities, can and do give people the Mass, the sacraments, and are conduits of God's grace?

A book I sometimes recommend to those troubled about troubled priests is Graham Greene's "The Power and the Glory." It is an historical novel laid in the State of Tabasco, Mexico, during the terrible persecution of the Church and the priesthood in the 1930s. It is about a priest who had problems, who wanted to run away to a safe state from the persecution which followed him everywhere, but who remained in order to serve the people and ended up captured and executed by the Mexican authorities.

# Essays in Theology

- Pope John Paul II releases an encyclical that applies the Church's social teachings to the Church itself.
  - Catholics who have never read any of the documents of Vatican II begin reading them — starting with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.
  - Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre calls off his schism.
  - Seattle's Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen is made a cardinal.
  - the "official" ban on altar girls, women lectors and women everything else is lifted.
  - the ecumenical movement gets a jump-start.
  - God continues to love us and be as merciful toward us as ever.
- Well, at least we can count on the last item. Happy 1989!
- Father Charles Curran is allowed to teach Catholic moral theology again at Catholic University, apart from the ecclesiastical degree program.
  - "pro-life" Catholics picket nuclear weapons factories, "pro-peace" Catholics picket abortion clinics and no one pickets movie houses.
  - the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) successfully renews thousands of parish communities.
  - a few diocesan newspapers become as informative, as interesting to read and as open to diversity as are the nation's best secular papers.
  - the Catholic University of America functions once again as a university in the fullest sense of the word: respecting academic freedom and enjoying educational autonomy.

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