

Columnists

Coalescing and colliding, part two

By Father Paul J. Cuddy

Last week this column noted that Father Richard McBrien and I, both priests of the Catholic Church, sometimes coalesce and sometimes collide. Hence, comments on his article on the liturgy in his Jan. 2 column. To continue.

Father McBrien: "The responses are given by the whole congregation, and not just by two altar boys. The whole community participates in the celebration, in word and often in song as well."

Comment: Congregational participation is a great plus, if not the greatest in the new liturgy. However, people should know that this was developing long before Vatican II. Chaplains who served during World War II, 20 years before the council, will attest that the little Father Stedman Sunday Missal was used by hundreds of thousands of our military folk, bringing surprisingly good Mass participation.

However, I think it has been a loss to the Church to discard altar boys, or give them very little to do. Father Bill Dugan, CSB, one-time principal of Aquinas Institute, Rochester, told me: "Old Monsignor O'Brien, my pastor in Wellsville, had 100 altar boys, whom he trained strictly, and involved them in many ceremonies beside the Mass. He had more vocations from Wellsville than any other place in the Buffalo diocese." Might that give a clue why there are almost no vocations today?

Fr. McB.: "There is a presentation of the gifts on the part of selected members of the congregation."

Comment: I greatly like the presentation of the gifts, but am frequently exasperated by the clumsiness at some parishes. Good liturgy should flow with grace and ease. Many parishes do assign groups, who are ready to make the procession down the aisle, and this is good. But if no one is assigned, the liturgy bogs down in the clumsy pause until some come forward, and oftentimes too many come and collide. The more persons involved in the presentation of the gifts, the better. I like it when families with several children bring the gifts, even the toddlers. And I like groups of diverse people processing with the gifts, indicating variety in

On the Right side

the parish.

Fr. McB.: "Most of the congregation ... come forward to receive Communion."

Comment: True. Almost everyone gets in line, but is it with the thoughtfulness and reverence of former days? There has been a subtle downgrading of the awful holiness of the Blessed Sacrament, both in location and in devotion. Excepting for Mass, Forty Hours, Benediction, Holy Hours and the like have been cast aside. We may in the past have been overcautious about the exclusive handling of the sacrament, the vessels, the tabernacle key by the priest, but it had a psychological value in impressing the awe due to the Eucharistic Lord. Today? Not quite so. Once I was distributing Holy Communion in Webster. A 12-year-old girl came forward and I placed the Sacred Host on a piece of gum which she had cleverly flattened on her tongue. Pre-Vatican II reception of Holy Communion was done with great reverence. Now it's often a bit of casualness, as the people form a line.

From these observations, some will conclude: "The dunderhead never could adjust to Vatican II." The contrary is true. But the aberrations which came from misrepresenting the council have been baleful.

A whole generation has gone to the cemetery since the council, and many of that generation suffered harassments by litniks who imposed their experimentations on devout people who had no redress. How dreadful to have good, faithful Catholics before Vatican II scorned as Father McBrien describes Mother Angelica: "An old-fashioned, pre-Vatican nun with the personality of an old-fashioned pre-Vatican housekeeper." Vatican II is a continuation of the Catholic tradition, not a cancellation of what came before.

God wills men to save one another

By Father Albert Shamou

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 5:1-11; (R1) Isaiah 6:1-8; (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

Members of a confirmation class I was teaching threw this objection at me: "Why do we need the church anyway? Why can't we deal directly with God?"

Well, I think next Sunday's readings are an answer. The three readings tell us loud and clear that God acts through others. Men will be saved by other men. That is God's way.

Thus the readings treat of a triple commissioning: Isaiah, Paul and Peter. The pattern of their vocations is the same. There is an event producing wonder. For Isaiah, it was the vision of heaven while he was worshiping in the temple. For Paul, it was the vision of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. For Peter, it was the miraculous catch of fish.

All three reacted the same way: they declared themselves unworthy. Isaiah, overcome by the holiness of God, cried out: "I am a man of unclean lips. Woe is me!" Paul, blinded by the vision of the risen Lord, confessed: "I am the least of the apostles." And Peter, sensing the divine presence in Jesus after the miracle, no longer calls Him "Master," but "Lord": "Leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man."

On these occasions, Isaiah, Paul and Peter were not just called by Jesus to follow Him. They were sent out on a mission. Isaiah preached the holiness of God. Peter and Paul preached that this holy God stooped down to the level of humankind to lift it up to Godliness.

Paul called this preaching the Gospel. He told the Corinthians that this Gospel, not their philosophy, would save them. The basis of this Gospel was the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection was a bodily one. Therefore, Paul was implying, the Corinthians were wrong to view the body as worthless. Tainted with Platonic philosophy as they were, they saw the body simply as a prison for the soul — corruptible and of no eternal value.

It is significant, in view of some who say Paul was the author of Christianity, that Paul himself admits that the Gospel he has preached was based on tradition: "I handed on to you what I myself received"; and on eyewitnesses: "He was seen by Cephas, the Twelve, 500 brethren, most of whom are still alive."

So the first point ought to be clear; namely, that God willed to save others through others. There was a statue of the Sacred Heart without

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hands. Under it was written the words: "I have no hands but yours." God has put Himself at a disadvantage in saving souls; namely, at the disadvantage of needing us. For some people, we may be the only Bible they ever read.

Secondly, we must never let the holiness of God frighten us. Some see His holiness as making Him a merciless, severe, condemnatory person in the face of our sinfulness and nothingness. Some see God's holiness as a reason for Him to condemn us. Yet the very opposite is true. Holiness is simply goodness at its best. Holiness is only an immutable love of what is good. God is love. God is good. God is eternal. Therefore God is holy, because He eternally loves the good that He is. Precisely because He is holy, He loves us; He is good to us; He will always be so. He loves us to be good; and what is most important, He will help us to become good just as He helped Isaiah, Paul and Peter.

Finally, the Gospel story teaches us that Jesus is interested in everybody who works. He is willing and ready to help each and every one who works hard.

He himself was a hard worker. He knew dirt, dust, discouragement. He got tired, thirsty and hungry. He knew what it was to earn a living. That was why He was always so interested in working people: farmers, vinedressers, shepherds, fishermen.

When the apostles had fished all night and caught nothing, He could sympathize with them. Though they were tired and exhausted, He told them to try just once more. They did, and they caught two boatloads of fish.

Our Lord wished to teach another lesson here; namely, if you try to work alone, you will often come up empty-handed. But if you work with Him, your work will be doubly blessed.

At Medjugorje, Our Lady told the visionaries to tell the people: "You work too much and you pray too little. That is why your work is never done. Pray more and work less; and you will not only do all your work well, but you will even have time to spare."

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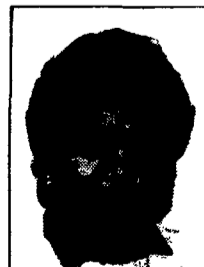
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