

Grace gained at no price is enemy of church

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated Columnist

No Catholic will be dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and shot to death with high-powered rifles for upholding the Vatican's ban on *in vitro* fertilization or for staunchly defending the discipline of obligatory celibacy for priests.

No Catholic risks his or her life for speaking out boldly, even stridently, against the legalization and funding of abortions.

No Catholic will receive threatening phone calls, or be denounced on radio and television by name and in violent terms, or have his or her residence surrounded by hostile military forces for publicly criticizing so-called dissident theologians or for supporting the current agenda of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

No Catholic will be raped and murdered for upholding official church teaching on birth control, homosexuality, or divorce.

And no Catholic will be denied Holy Communion for public disagreement with papal teaching on social justice or episcopal teaching on capital punishment.

The late German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred at the hands of the Nazis at the end of World War II, had two words for all this: "cheap grace."

Cheap grace, he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, is "the deadly enemy of our Church." It is "Grace without price; grace without cost!"

"Cheap grace," he continued, "means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God.

"An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, ipso facto a part of that grace.

"Cheap grace," Bonhoeffer concluded, "is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

When Catholics are tempted to boast of their own doctrinal and moral firmness, fidelity, loyalty, obedience, and orthodoxy, they should be prepared at the same time to spell out the precise cost of their firmness, fidelity, loyalty, obedience, and orthodoxy.

For firmness without risk is no virtue. Neither is fidelity without price. Nor loyalty without penalty. Nor obedience without retribution. Nor orthodoxy without sacrifice.

It requires no moral courage for a man or for a woman beyond her child-bearing years to take a stand against abortion.

It requires no cardinal virtue of fortitude for a heterosexual person to take a stand against homosexuality.

To boast of such stances as these is to wallow in cheap grace.

For Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is set over against costly grace. "It is costly because it costs a man his life." Costly grace is the grace of discipleship, of really and truly following the way of Jesus Christ — a way that leads first to the cross before it leads to the resurrection.

The four church women (three nuns and

one lay volunteer) who were raped and brutally murdered in El Salvador several years ago lived by costly grace.

They weren't killed for teaching the Baltimore Catechism or for encouraging devotion to Mary or for trying to instill loyalty to the pope.

They were raped and murdered because of their work with the poor, because of their efforts to raise the consciousness of the poor and to convince them of their God-given human dignity.

But such religious instruction was truly subversive — subversive of a social and economic order that left almost all of the country's wealth in the hands of 14 prominent families and all of the country's power in the hands of the military and right-wing politicians.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating Mass — and for essentially the same reason. He, too, spoke out on behalf of the poor and he called upon the military to disobey their commanders' orders to repress the peasants, trade unionists and others who questioned the established order.

And yet when Pope Paul VI had named



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

him the new Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, the wealthy and powerful contributed generously to his consecration ceremony that, according to *The New York Times*, "set a new standard for lavishness."

That word "lavishness" rings a mournful bell in light of recent events in El Salvador.

Six Jesuits and their cook and her daughter were aroused from sleep last November and systematically and cruelly slaughtered by men in military uniforms.

The Jesuit Provincial for Central America, Father Jose Maria Tojeira, noted that they were "assassinated with lavish barbarity." Their brains were taken out and left by their bodies as a signature.

The symbolism was obvious. The slain Jesuits' ideas were dangerous and subversive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had it right: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church."

Cain becomes a fugitive because of his awful crime

By Cindy Bassett
Courier Columnist

"Cain, what's wrong?" Abel cried as his brother brushed angrily past him. "Did I do something?"

"Just leave me alone!" Cain retorted. "What do you have to complain about? Things are always going your way."

Abel watched sadly as Cain stomped away. His brother always seemed to be mad over something lately. Today was to have been a day of celebration. Both of them had gone to present their special offerings as gifts to God.

"It's only right that we do so," Abel told Cain. "If not for God's goodness to us both, where would we be? The ground would not produce crops for you, Cain. And I would not be a shepherd."

"What's the use?" Cain muttered.



THE BIBLE CORNER

"Someday we will die and become nothing more than the dust of the earth."

This morning, Cain did come and join Abel to make an offering to God. Abel brought his finest lamb and sacrificed it in thanksgiving.

Abel was certain that Cain would bring a portion of his cherry crop. This past spring, the spectacular blossoms of his cherry trees had given way to the sweetest fruit Abel had ever tasted. When Cain arrived this morning, however, he brought vegetables instead.

Later that same day, Abel asked, "Cain, what happened when you presented your offering to God?"

Cain scowled at him. "God rejected both me and my offering."

"I'm sorry, brother," Abel said. "Maybe you should try again."

Cain's expression changed. "I think you may be right, Abel. Come with me now out to my field and help me choose something else as an offering."

As soon as the two brothers reached the field, Abel went to the cherry tree. "This is your best, Cain. I didn't understand why you didn't choose this for your offering in the first place."

Cain's rage boiled up inside of him. Abel was his younger brother. He had no right to tell him what to do.

While Abel was still admiring the cherry tree, Cain came up quickly behind him. He struck his brother so hard on the head that he killed Abel.

Cain looked around. They were alone. He dragged Abel's body to the edge of the field and left it there without another thought about his brother.

A short time later, Cain heard the Lord calling out to him. "Where is your offering, Cain? Did I not tell you that if your heart were right I would accept your gift?"

Cain said nothing. "Where is Abel?" the Lord asked him. "How should I know?" Cain said gruffly. "Maybe an animal killed him. Am I supposed to take care of him, too?"

"Cain, I know everything about you. The ground cries out with your own brother's blood that you have spilled. Even now, there is no sorrow in your heart for this crime. From this day on, the soil of the earth will no longer yield anything for you. You are sentenced to wander the earth as a fugitive."

Cain left the rest of his family that day. He went and lived in a land called "Wandering," which was located east of Eden.

Scripture reference: Genesis, Chapter 4:1-16.

Meditation: "I am your God. I don't need your sacrifices. What I want from you is your true thanks." (Psalm 50:7, 9, 14).

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