

# Heresy doesn't only afflict those on the left

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Heresy is a technical theological term. It refers to the rejection of a solemnly defined teaching of the church, known as a dogma.

But there are Catholics who mistakenly believe that a rejection, or criticism, of any official teaching is heresy.

In their view, heresy is an everyday occurrence, like the common cold, and only liberal or progressive Catholics seem to catch it. But is that really the case?

The following items, culled from Catholic newspapers and from my own mail, suggest that "heresy" is alive and kicking on the right as well as the left:

• A Florida priest's column in the nationally distributed *Our Sunday Visitor* of March 4 offers comfort to an Indiana resident who complained that the cross atop the local church steeple was replaced by a rooster — a symbol, he or she was told, of the resurrection.

"The Resurrection," the columnist replied, "is not at all necessary for our redemption and is, if the phrase is not too flippant, icing on the cake." (The phrase is not just flippant, Father. By your

theological standards, it's "heretical.")

"The great central act of human history is the redemption of the human race, accomplished by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through His passion and death. Jesus was not born to be resurrected. He was born to die on the Cross in order that we might have eternal life."

One wonders what the columnist makes of First Corinthians 15:17. Or of the Easter Vigil, for that matter.

• Another Christological gem, this time in a letter from Connecticut in response to a recent column on Satan and Mary: "Facing Jesus is still tough, but we can get our breath. Jesus is still a little remote; after all, His Father owned the store. But Mary is one of us, and yet somehow in their family, too."

Jesus, our Mediator? True God and true man? Like us in all things except for sin?

• But just how effective has Christ's redemptive work been on our behalf? Take note of this dire warning in a letter from Maine, which chastised me for spreading "the ultimate in heresy: universal salvation."

Indeed, the writer was "scandalized" to

read in my column that the human race may be an essentially saved community from which only a relative few may be lost.

"Christ clearly taught that few will be saved, because few could find the narrow gate of salvation, and that many will be lost through the wide path," the person wrote.

"Through Christ's sacrifice on the cross (no resurrection here either!) there is universal redemption," my correspondent conceded. But — "Salvation must be earned." The "heresy" of Pelagianism?

Jesus, I was told, "did more preaching to warn against hell than anything else. The fear of hell is a hallmark of His message."

That puts love of neighbor pretty much in its place, I guess. In any case, if most of us are going to hell, it was only fair of Jesus to give us some advance warning. Good news, indeed.

• Speaking of love of neighbor, try this one. It's an excerpt from a published interview with a well-known and very successful Catholic businessman, who has ridiculed — there is no other word for it — the bishops for their supposedly naive 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy and the social teachings of the church.



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

"You can't get rid of the poor. I mean, no matter what you do for them, some people are either ill, or unmotivated, or mentally screwed up, and your never going to eliminate poverty," he said.

"I have three or four homes," he continued. "I don't feel at all guilty about this. I was brought up in a huge household with 68 servants and a yacht and 28 crew members and a place in Scotland with 80 or 100 people. I was brought up that way. Questions like ... 'Why do you have a house in Florida?' 'Give it to the poor.' Baloney."

He added, "Why do (the bishops) think that other people should be saints and work their (expletive) off morning, noon and night to give away everything they don't need? Now, you suggest this to St. Augustine or St. Francis. They'd do that. But how many saints are there?" (*New York Daily News*, Sept. 24, 1989).

Don't look this way, please. There's no one over here but a few of us hard-working camels trying to pass through the eye of a needle.

• Most right-wing "heresies" probably have to do with the structure and government of the church. Such "heretics" commonly assume that Jesus left the church a precisely detailed organized chart in the shape of a pyramid.

And so another letter-writer from Connecticut complains: "I feel it is unfortunate that some people do not realize, or ever accept the fact, that the Catholic Church is an absolute monarchy."

"Orders, Rev. McBrien, come from the top down," he admonished me. "The truly humble accept that fact."

Yes, sir. Excuse us for thinking, sir. Any further instructions, sir? (Click of the heels, with stiff salute).

# God comforts his prophet with a gentle whisper

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

The torrential rains had already begun even before King Ahab arrived back at the palace.

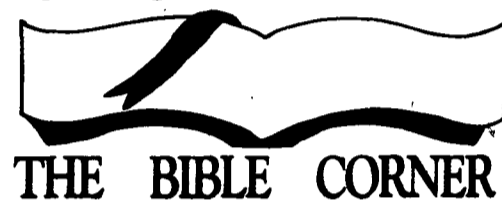
"Is Elijah dead?" Queen Jezebel asked as she came out to meet him.

"I am sorry to tell you this, my queen, but there is not even one of your prophets left," King Ahab replied. "All of them were killed after Elijah won the contest on Mount Carmel."

Queen Jezebel didn't wait to hear any more. She stomped into the palace to find a messenger. "Go, at once and see Elijah!" she screamed. "Tell him that by this time tomorrow, he will join my prophets in their present state. Or may my own god strike me dead if this is not so!"

Elijah was terrified when he received this message. He traveled far from the palace until he was completely exhausted. When he came to the desert, he dismissed his own servant and continued on alone.

Finally, he came to a broom tree in the middle of the desert. He sat down under the tree and prayed, "I've had enough of these problems, Lord. I don't know what to do. Please take my life. I'm ready to die." Then he fell asleep.



## THE BIBLE CORNER

A few hours later, Elijah felt someone shaking him awake. A man said, "Rise now, have something to eat."

When Elijah sat up, he saw a jug of fresh water and a loaf of warm bread. So he ate and drank before he went back to sleep until this same person awoke him again.

"Get up and eat some more," the man said. "You must strengthen yourself for the journey ahead." And then the man was gone as quickly as he had come.

After Elijah finished eating the second time, he went on into the desert for another 40 days until he reached Mount Sinai, where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. He found a cave in the side of the mountain and spent the night there.

"What is it that you want me to do, Lord?" Elijah prayed. "I've really tried to do all that you asked. But now I am the only one left who believes in you. The Israelites have broken your commandments to follow the false gods of Queen Jezebel. Maybe it is better for me to just

die now before I am killed."

Elijah waited for a response from the Lord. He went to the entrance of the cave when he heard the sounds of a powerful windstorm that came with fury on the mountain. The Lord was not in the wind.

Next an earthquake came which was so violent that it seemed to shake the mountain from its foundation. Still, Elijah heard nothing from God.

A massive fire started on the mountain. It nearly consumed everything in its path. Elijah listened, but he heard nothing.

When everything was quiet again, Elijah thought he heard a gentle whisper. He stood at the entrance of the cave and waited.

"Why are you here, Elijah?" the Lord asked.

Elijah poured out all of his troubles before the Lord. When he finished, God said, "I want you to keep on going. Soon all will be different. Anoint Elisha to be your helper. And there are still 7,000 people in Israel who have never worshipped Baal."

Elijah left Mount Sinai and did all that the Lord had commanded.

Scripture reference: 1 Kings, Chapter 19.

Meditation: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

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