

One should refrain from judging other religions

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

It is always hazardous for a member of one denomination to try to instruct members of another denomination about the nature of their religious obligations to their church.

Charles Colson, a former Nixon aide who served a prison term for a Watergate-related crime and chairman of Prison Fellowship Ministries, presumes to do just that in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* on July 2.

He defends against "the liberal (media) establishment" the recent actions of San Diego's Bishop Leo Maher, who barred a pro-choice candidate for a state Senate seat from receiving Holy Communion (she won the election), and of New York's Cardinal John J. O'Connor, who issued a 19,000-word paper on abortion in which he warned Catholic politicians that they risked excommunication "by advocating legisla-

tion supporting abortion or by making public funds available for abortion."

Colson, who is an evangelical Protestant, instructs Catholics on proper Catholic behavior: "Every Catholic in the world has voluntarily placed himself or herself under the teaching and discipline of the Catholic Church — teachings like the Vatican Council II statement that, 'No Catholic can responsibly take a "pro-choice" stand when the "choice" in question involves the taking of innocent human life.'"

"Church canons," Colson continues, "direct leaders to deny communion to those who defy church teachings."

There are at least three problems with Colson's argument. First, contrary to a popular misconception which he evidently shares, not all Catholic teachings and disciplinary rules are of equal authority.

In some cases at least, it is possible to criticize and even reject a particular teaching or ecclesiastical rule without

forfeiting one's good standing in the church.

To be sure, there are teachings that have been taught in the most solemn fashion and are to be regarded by the faithful as definitive, or infallible. Deliberate and culpable rejection of such teachings places one outside the church.

The teaching of the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) that Jesus is divine ("of the same substance with the Father") is one example.

Infallible teachings, however, are the exception to the rule. Perhaps 99 percent of the church's official teachings are non-infallible and, therefore, subject to error.

The Catholic Church has taught in the past, for example, that torture under certain circumstances is morally permissible; that the sun revolves around the earth (the Galileo case); that the taking of interest on a loan is sinful; that the state has the right and even the duty to punish its citizens for



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practicing a false (i.e. non-Catholic) religion because "error has no rights," and so forth.

Disciplines have even less authority than teachings, and are more subject to change.

The rule requiring priests to be unmarried is part of the discipline of the church. But for many centuries priests were married, including even Peter.

Indeed, one of the qualifications for bishops laid down in the First Letter to Timothy was that they be "married only once" and be capable of "keeping his children under control with perfect dignity" (3:2,4).

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church has been accepting married ex-Episcopal priests into the Catholic priesthood and allowing those men to remain in their married state. Such rules are clearly church-made, not God-made.

The church's Code of Canon Law implicitly recognizes the right of Catholics to challenge rules and even act in a manner contrary to them. Canon 26 concedes that a custom contrary to a church law obtains the force of law "when it has been legitimately observed for 30 continuous and complete years ..."

Secondly, the quotation which Colson attributes to the Second Vatican Council exists nowhere in the 16 documents of the council. The council makes only two passing references to abortion, both in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (articles 27 and 51).

In the first reference, the council refers to abortion as "opposed to life," and in the second, as an "unspeakable" crime. The term "pro-choice" appears nowhere.

(The Colson quotation is actually from a resolution of the U.S. Catholic bishops passed last November and cited by Cardinal O'Connor.)

Thirdly, and finally, Colson is wrong when he asserts without qualification that "church canons direct leaders to deny communion to those who defy church teachings." As indicated above, there are many different kinds and levels of church teachings.

For example, no bishop would deny a Catholic Holy Communion for rejecting church teaching on the existence of angels.

Furthermore, none of the Catholic politicians Colson has in mind — he mentions only Governor Cuomo and Congressman Charles Rangel, both of New York — has ever publicly "defied" church teaching on abortion. On the contrary, they insist that they accept the teaching.

Where they differ with church authorities is over the proper political response to this complex problem. But that's a distinction that seems to escape Charles Colson, and many others like him.

King Hezekiah receives an astonishing message

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Take the food away, I am too sick to eat," King Hezekiah told his servant. When he saw the man's dismay, the king added, "Perhaps, later, we'll try again."

King Hezekiah sighed with weariness. It was often said that before a person died, his whole life passed in front of him. During his illness, the king's head swarmed with memories like a bee's nest.

With God's help, he had defeated 185,000 Assyrians who came to defeat the city of Jerusalem. Now he felt as if his whole life was slipping away and there was nothing to be done.

The boils had started to appear on his skin several weeks ago. As they grew and multiplied, they seemed to extract his life from him.

"Sorry to disturb you again," the same servant said as he returned, this time followed by another man. "The prophet, Isaiah, said it was most important that he see you at once."

For his part, Isaiah said nothing until the servant had left the room and closed the



door behind him. "I regret to see you so ill."

King Hezekiah nodded in agreement from his bed. He was too weak to even sit up and receive his guest properly.

Isaiah cleared his voice nervously. "King Hezekiah, I have come here today with a message for you from God."

The king's face brightened momentarily until he heard Isaiah's next words: "It's not good news. Nevertheless, it is the will of God."

Isaiah paused. "Well, go on then, out with it!" the king said with impatience.

"This is what the Lord says: 'Tell King Hezekiah to get his affairs in order. He is not going to recover from this illness. Very soon, he will die.'"

The king was stunned. He didn't utter a

word in reaction, but instead turned away from the prophet and faced the wall. Isaiah took this cue to leave. Before he had even closed the door behind him, he heard a sob burst forth from King Hezekiah.

"I know the way out," Isaiah said when he saw the servant's puzzled look."

The servant listened in front of the king's chambers.

"Remember, O Lord, that I have tried to be a faithful servant," the king prayed aloud as he wept. "I have followed your laws and tried to be a good ruler for your people."

Meanwhile, Isaiah walked through the palace courtyard and received another message from God. He returned to King Hezekiah's room immediately where he found him still lying in bed.

"King Hezekiah, I have come back here to tell you that God, in his great mercy, has heard your prayer and seen your tears. In three days you will feel well enough to go worship at the temple and offer a prayer of thanksgiving. God has added 15 more years to your life."

Isaiah turned to the king's astonished servant. "Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to his boils."

"What sign will God give so that I will know without question that I am truly to be healed?" King Hezekiah asked.

"Shall the shadow on the palace steps go forward 10 steps or backward 10 steps?" Isaiah asked.

"It is impossible for time to go backward," the king said. "Have the shadow go back 10 steps."

After Isaiah had prayed to God, the shadow on the palace steps went back 10 full paces. In three days, King Hezekiah stood at the temple praising God. And he ruled as king of Judah for 15 more years.

Scripture reference: 2 Kings, 20:1-11.

Meditation: "O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me." (Psalm 30:2).

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