

Reactionaries allow fear to control their lives

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

According to a July 10 report in *The New York Times*, recent psychological studies of homophobia confirm the conventional theory that some men use hostility and violence against homosexuals to reassure themselves about their own sexuality.

But these new findings also disclose that the greatest portion of anti-homosexual bias arises from a combination of fear and self-righteousness in which homosexuals are viewed as contemptible threats to the moral universe.

A psychologist on the faculty of the University of California at Davis noted that most of the bias against homosexuals is expressed by those for whom homosexuals "stand as a proxy for all that is evil."

For such people, hostility toward gays and lesbians is a kind of litmus test of their own moral probity. The affirmation of one's moral values is, according to this re-

cent research, the most common motive for anti-homosexual sentiment and behavior.

Often they act out of adherence to the tenets of their religious traditions, some of which teach homosexuality itself is sinful. Indeed, when reinforced by religious conviction, hostility toward homosexuals is practically impossible to change.

These recent studies have found that those with the most intense hostility have, first, an extreme fear that the world is an unsafe place and that society is at risk, and, secondly, a self-righteousness that leads them to judge those who hold different values as morally inferior.

"They see homosexuality as a sign that society is disintegrating, and as a threat to their sense of morality," according to professor Robert Altemeyer of the University of Manitoba.

"Their self-righteousness," he said, "makes them feel they are acting morally when they attack homosexuals. It over-

comes the normal inhibition against aggression."

We Catholics may have more to learn from these studies of homophobia than meets the eye.

Religious reactionaries — many of whom may also be homophobic — are similarly motivated by fear and self-righteousness. I have bulging files of their letters, accumulated over the course of some 25 years, to support this assertion.

They tend to see the world as essentially evil. We are surrounded by the forces of darkness. Satan and his demons are behind every bush, ready to pounce. Even the church is vulnerable.

Priests and bishops are portrayed as recklessly permissive and dangerously lax about the enforcement of divine ordinances. Alleged messages from Mary are filled with dire warnings and ominous threats that not even the oils of ordination can immunize one against.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Just as the very existence of the homosexual is a threat to the homophobe's sense of security in a morally fragile universe, so the very presence of independent thinkers and critics in the church is a threat to the religious reactionary's need for certitude in a universe filled with diversity and ambiguity.

Unfortunately, such people seem to want the rest of us to go through life in the same clutches of fear by which their own lives are imprisoned.

In fear of hell. In fear of the devil. In fear of sex. In fear of joy. In fear of hope. In fear especially of God, whom one of my recent letter writers, a retired priest, described as being "too, merciful."

Inquiring thinkers, especially theologians, endanger the religious reactionary's sense of security.

For the religious reactionary, the church is the water-tight ship ("the barque of Peter") on a storm-tossed sea. Theologians are below deck drilling holes. Somehow they must be stopped, either by taking away their tools (withdrawing their right to teach theology) or by throwing them overboard (excommunication).

The religious reactionary, like the homophobe, also betrays an attitude of self-righteousness. He or she assumes a posture of moral superiority over those who are — to them — less loyal to the pope, or less orthodox, or less strict in their adherence to the laws and rules of the church.

In denouncing and fighting against theologians the religious reactionary feels even more loyal, more orthodox, more faithful. The waging of the battle becomes itself a litmus test of the reactionary's own probity and doctrinal fidelity.

It is known that some homophobes are actually homosexuals themselves. Their homophobia masks a deep psychological struggle with their own sexual identity.

Similarly, one suspects that many religious reactionaries are people struggling with profound crisis of faith which they cannot admit even to themselves.

While they need and deserve our patience, understanding, and compassion, they should have nothing to say or do in the meantime about the life and mission of the church — its liturgical celebrations, its religious education, its pastoral practices.

Salvation is, literally, health. Only healthy people can lead us to it.

King Xerxes banishes his wife, finds a new queen

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Long ago and far away, a certain king lived in the kingdom of Persia. King Xerxes had both great wealth and power. Nevertheless, there was still one thing in his life which was the source of great unhappiness: he had a most disagreeable wife.

Not only did Queen Vashti have a dull personality, but she refused to obey any of the king's commands.

King Xerxes consulted with all of his officials about the queen. At last it was decided that Queen Vashti was banished forever from the king's presence.

Now the king had both great wealth and power and no disagreeable wife to make him unhappy. King Xerxes' new problem, however, was that he was lonely.

But the king's personal attendants came up with a brilliant solution. A declaration was immediately proclaimed and posted everywhere: "Let a search be conducted for a new queen throughout the entire kingdom. She must be beautiful, kind and agreeable."

A commissioner for a new queen was appointed in all 127 of the kingdom's provinces. The women who were selected were brought back to Susa, the royal city where King Xerxes lived.

Before they were allowed to even meet



the king, each of them was required to go through a year of intensive beauty treatments and training.

Hundreds of beauties were then presented to the king. Unfortunately, not one of them proved suitable. It was feared that a new queen would never be found.

One day, Mordecai, the king's gatekeeper, learned of the dilemma and went to see his niece.

"Esther, if King Xerxes ever saw you, he would make you the new queen," Mordecai said. "There is none more beautiful in the entire realm."

"Uncle Mordecai, you are more than just a little partial," Esther said. "Besides, since my own parents died, you have been both mother and father to me. I could never leave you."

"You forget that I am the official palace gatekeeper," Mordecai reminded her. "I can still see you all the time."

At last Esther relented. When she finished her beauty treatments and training,

she was presented to the king. Finally, a new queen had been found.

"Congratulations, Esther," her uncle said when he heard the news. "There's just one other thing. Don't tell the king that you are Jewish or that I am your uncle."

King Xerxes proclaimed a national celebration and held a royal banquet in honor of Queen Esther. Everything was fine until Mordecai learned of a plot against the king by two of his own officers.

Mordecai told his niece about the assassination plan and traitors were hanged in the public square. The incident was recorded in the official annals of the kingdom and soon forgotten.

Shortly thereafter, King Xerxes appointed a new chief minister to serve second in command. Haman's ranking was so high that everyone was required to kneel down before him when he passed.

Haman was very pleased with the honor accorded him. But everyday when he came to the palace, all knelt as he passed except Mordecai.

"Why do you persist in disobedience?" the king's officials asked Mordecai. "Haman will see that you are punished."

"It would not be right to honor Haman as if he were God. I have only one God," Mordecai told them.

Some of these officials told Haman that Mordecai was a Jew. Haman's anger built up inside of him like a volcano ready to spew forth.

"Soon Mordecai will pay for his lack of respect," Haman said. "Not only him, but every Jew living in the kingdom."

(To be continued next week).
Scripture reference: Book of Esther, Chapter 1-3:6.

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Scholar, author to speak

Dr. Reginald Wilson from the American Council on Education will be the principal speaker at St. John Fisher College's opening convocation for faculty and administrators.

Wilson will address this year's convocation topic, "Meeting the Educational Challenge of an Increasingly Diverse Student Body in the 21st Century," at 9:30 a.m. in Basil Hall Auditorium, Room 135 on Thursday, Aug. 23.

The author and editor of three books and more than 20 articles, Wilson received his doctorate in educational psychology from Wayne State University.

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