

Church must attract converts for right reasons

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Convert-making was a flourishing ministry back in the 1940s and 1950s, when it was simply taken for granted that the Catholic Church alone was the "One, true Church" of Christ, and that all other Christian denominations (we wouldn't call them "churches" in those days) were false religions.

We assumed that the principal difference between Catholics and Protestants was that Catholics had the truth, taught with certitude by the pope and the hierarchy, as well as the divinely guaranteed means of grace, known as the sacraments, while the Protestants had to rely upon an error-prone private interpretation of the Bible and the weak power of their own devotional fervor.

Thus, when Catholics confessed their sins to a priest and received absolution,

they were certain of God's forgiveness because of the sacrament of Penance. Protestants, on the other hand, might bruise their knees in prolonged prayer and drench their faces with tears of sorrow and still not be sure that God had forgiven them.

We look back upon that mentality, not in anger or disgust, but with understanding and perhaps not a little amusement. It was a different time, with a different mentality.

We Catholics followed the light as we saw it then. Today we see things differently because the light both of human experience and of scholarship has been cast more brightly and more broadly.

Thus, the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism officially acknowledged that the separation between Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation was the fault of people on both sides (n.3).

All Christians, Protestants as well as

Catholics, are united in "a certain, though imperfect, communion," because "all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honored by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers (and sisters) in the Lord by the sons (and daughters) of the Catholic Church.

In addition to baptism, Catholics and non-Catholic Christians share, "the written word of God, the life of grace, faith, hope, and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements."

The churches to which these non-Catholics belong "have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation." In fact, "the Spirit of Christ" uses them as "means of salvation."

Without denying that the Catholic Church

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ch itself possesses "the fullness of the means of salvation," the council's Decree on Ecumenism conceded that the Catholic Church as well as these other non-Catholic Churches is called to the path of reform and renewal (n.6), indeed to a change of heart, or conversion (n.7).

The council endorsed common worship and common prayer under some circumstances (n.8) as well as an ecumenical approach to the study of theology and doctrine (n.10).

It also warned against putting all of the church's teachings and disciplines on an equal footing. "When comparing doctrines, (theologians) should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their partnership to the foundation of the Christian faith" (n. 11).

Why, then, would a non-Catholic become a Catholic today?

Not for the reason one recent letter writer shared with me. "Among the many qualities of the Church that led to my conversion (13 years ago) was its hierarchy and authority.

"Here at last, as opposed to the Protestant churches in which I was raised," he continued, "was a church that very specifically proclaimed its beliefs, had an organization to implement and defend those beliefs, and claimed no less an authority than God Himself to be the author of those beliefs and the founder of the organization that perpetuated those beliefs."

A perfect answer for the 1950s, but one not tenable in the 1990s.

If a non-Catholic is attracted to the Catholic Church today, it should not be because of "the morass of Protestantism's solipsism" (to use my correspondent's polemical words) or the perceived "centralized, authoritarian, hierarchical" nature of Catholicism.

Given the sacramental nature of the church ("a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God" — Pope Paul VI), one should be attracted, first of all, to the Catholic people in whom God is present and active. One should want to become a part of this particular community of Christian faith.

One should be attracted especially to the church's Eucharist, its commitment to justice and human rights, its ministry to the poor, the elderly, and those persons with disabilities, its respect and reverence for conscience, and especially its sacramental vision of reality, by which it sees God in all things and, therefore, sees all reality — sin notwithstanding — as fundamentally good and holy.

The Catholic Church should welcome new members. Indeed, it should rejoice when others are attracted to the Catholic family, but it should never encourage them to come in for the wrong reasons.

Protestantism's deficiencies or a lust for certitude are wrong reasons.

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Haman devises a cruel plan to punish Mordecai

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Mordecai, here comes Haman, the king's chief minister. It will not go well for you if you do not kneel down with the rest of us and pay him homage," said the official standing with him at the palace gate.

"The one worthy of that honor is God," Mordecai replied, ignoring the man's advice.

Haman didn't seem to notice Mordecai or others as he passed en route to the palace. But just for a moment, his face reddened when he sensed Mordecai's slight and he shot him a look of utter disgust.

As soon as Haman was out of sight, someone said to Mordecai, "Don't say we didn't warn you! You are in for it now."

If Mordecai was worried, nothing in his expression showed any signs of it. He was glad that no one, including Haman, knew that Queen Esther was his niece.

"What brings you to the palace so early?" Queen Esther asked when she saw Haman. "Come, join us for some breakfast," she said, pointing to the seat next to King Xerxes.

Haman was pleased and momentarily he forgot his anger against Mordecai. But as



soon as the queen left the room, his mind went back to it.

"King Xerxes, it has come to my attention, as your chief minister, that there is a certain group of people living in your kingdom who do not obey your laws."

"They are plotting to overthrow me?" the king questioned.

"Not yet," Haman said slowly, "but one never knows. I think it best to eliminate these people. Not only will this take care of the problem, it will serve as an example to everyone else in your kingdom."

Haman paused to check the king's reaction.

"In fact, I am so concerned about this situation, I am even willing to offer a reward of my own money to pay those who will get rid of these people," he said.

Haman waited anxiously. King Xerxes seemed to be thinking over carefully what he had just said. What if he forbade such

strong actions on the part of his chief minister?

When Haman thought he could stand it no longer, the king took his own signet ring and handed it to him, saying, "Keep your money, Haman. Do with these people as you see fit."

Haman was delighted. The signet ring gave him the power to proclaim a law in the king's own name. He left the palace immediately.

When he reached the palace gates, Haman turned toward Mordecai and shook his fist saying, "You'll see!"

The first thing Haman did was summon his own officials together to cast the pure or lot. That was how the day was chosen on which every Jew living in the kingdom would be destroyed.

Next, Haman instructed the royal secretaries to write a proclamation to send to all 127 provinces of the kingdom: "Every Jew, young and old, men, women and children, will be annihilated on the 13th day of the 12th month. No one is to be spared. When these people have been eliminated, their worldly goods may be plundered."

That same day, couriers were dispatched to post the law in every province.

A great wail of anguish went up as soon as the law was read. Everyone, including Mordecai, put on sackcloth and ashes, the clothes of mourning. They spent their time fasting and praying.

For her part, Queen Esther did not learn about the law right away. It was only after she hadn't seen her uncle for several days that she began to sense that something was wrong.

Scripture reference: Book of Esther, Chapter 3-4:3.

SIGNATURE



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