

Stanford loss quells talk of divine influence

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I, for one, am relieved that Derek Brown dropped the pass in the end zone several weeks ago. It was the final play of the game in which Stanford defeated Notre Dame, 36-31, dumping the Fighting Irish from first place in the national rankings.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy attending home games; I'm delighted when the team wins, and I think Lou Holtz is one of the country's finest coaches. Notre Dame is lucky to have him.

But one could only imagine the theological fallout had that pass been caught for the winning touchdown. It

would have been the third time this season that Notre Dame had come dramatically from behind to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Last-minute victories in September over Michigan and Michigan State had already unleashed a torrent of pieties about divine intervention. More moderate souls conceded that God "himself" might not be so directly involved, but they were quick to give credit to the Blessed Mother.

Even Lou Holtz himself, an intelligent and savvy fellow, seemed to lend credence to this latter view. "I know you are going to say God doesn't care who wins and I say that's true," he told a press conference

after the win over Michigan State, "but I believe his mother does."

A sportswriter for *The Chicago Tribune* actually did a story about that remark, telephoning me and a few other theologians — Catholic and Protestant alike — for a reaction.

I told the *Tribune* that the coach's remark had to be tongue-in-cheek and that, so long as it remained at that level, it's all in good fun.

But if the remark was not intended as a bit of harmless humor, I continued, one would have to ask if God and the Blessed Mother were on a vacation or otherwise engaged during the five-year tenure of Lou

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Holtz's predecessor, Jerry Faust.

And Martin Marty, a Protestant church historian at the University of Chicago, wondered about the kind of God who couldn't make up his mind during Notre Dame's 10-10 tie with Michigan State in 1966.

Also, the piety that surrounds athletics reminds one of the liquor business. People buy liquor in good times to celebrate, and they buy it in bad times to drown their sorrow. Either way, the liquor business wins.

Pious sports fans are like that. They are quick to attribute victories, especially exciting last-minute victories, to divine favor. When their favorite team loses, however, they attribute defeat to the sins of others (at Notre Dame, the theology department always makes a convenient scapegoat) or to a letdown in prayer.

I expected a fair number of letters in response to *The Chicago Tribune* story, and I expected them to be as vitriolic as some of those I receive for comments attributed to me on the editorial and religion pages. I was wrong about the first expectation, but right about the second.

One person sent me a copy of his five-page, handwritten blast against the sportswriter who dared to quote us. "I'm still seething," he thundered.

He accused the writer of anti-religious prejudice and the rest of us of denying the most basic tenet of our faith; namely, the power of prayer, no matter what the cause.

Words like "disgrace," "shame," and "so-called," (as in "so-called Rev." and "so-called theologians") peppered his prose.

"If certain theologians can't practice what they are supposed to preach," he concluded, "Coach Holtz will — and does — and that's why his players respond by winning." Except against Stanford the very next week.

Another correspondent was so irate that she refused to accord me my usual ecclesiastical title. "Dear Sir," she began.

You can always tell an angry letter by the number of words that are in all caps. "THE LIKES OF YOU" appears no less than six times on a single page.

"THE LIKES OF YOU and the others interviewed were all liberals and of course the press planned it that way ... You know Satan does win some, especially those who are weak, who do not follow the Church, who holler the loudest and take the easy way out such as the LIKES OF YOU."

One of the letter writers sent copies to several people, including coach Holtz. "I will help you and the team, in prayer, that it be God's will to have ND No. 1 throughout the year."

Thank God, if you'll pardon the expression, for Stanford.

Jesus teaches Martha lesson about true priorities

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Mary, can't you pay attention to what you are doing?" I snapped at my sister. "If you don't trim a bit more from the stems, the flowers will not fit in the vase properly."

"I'm sorry, but I can't seem to think of anything else but Jesus coming here today," Mary smiled. "Do you think he'll arrive soon?"

"I certainly hope not!"

"Martha, what a terrible thing to say! Aren't you excited that Jesus is coming to our house for dinner?"

"Of course," I replied with a softer tone. "It's just that I'm so worried that we won't be finished with our preparation in time."

I envied my sister Mary. She had managed to go through all of the tasks that I had given her with a light heart. Not even my constant nagging had dampened her enthusiasm.

It was a great honor that Jesus was com-



ing to our house. I wanted everything to be perfect. Mary just didn't understand what had to be done.

"Martha, don't fret so! Jesus is coming to see us, not our house. I'm sure everything will be fine."

Before I could make any sort of reply, Mary suddenly bolted out the front door. "He's coming!" she shouted as she ran off down the road to meet Jesus.

I looked at her unfinished task and groaned. "Another job for me."

I greeted Jesus and his apostles briefly when they entered the house. Mary saw to it that they were seated comfortably. She brought fresh water and towels for them.

But there was still the meal to finish. I

thought I would give Mary the vegetables to wash and chop. Only Mary didn't come back. She had positioned herself at the feet of Jesus, who was telling her all that had happened since we'd last seen him.

Of all the nerve! I banged some of my cooking pots around the kitchen with frustration. Mary would hear that I needed her help. But there was no response from my sister. She still sat there, transfixed with Jesus.

The more I thought about Mary's selfishness the angrier I became. Finally, I could keep silent no longer. I stomped out from the kitchen to the room where the guests were sitting. Mary looked up just in time to see me scowling at her. She blushed at my intended insult.

"Jesus, don't you think it is unfair that Mary has left all the work to me?" I said. "Tell her to come and help me at once!"

I felt a little guilty when I saw Mary squirming with embarrassment at my tirade. She would just have to learn to do things my way.

Jesus did not address my sister when he finally spoke. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset over many things. But only one thing is really needed. Mary has chosen it. It will not be taken from her."

Now I was the one whose face blushed. When I looked up at Jesus, he didn't give me a look of condemnation. He was still waiting for me to choose.

And at last I realized my mistake. I had been so busy preparing for the event that I had nearly missed it. The only thing that was really needed was for me to stop and listen to Jesus.

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 10:38-42

Meditation: Where are you going with your life?

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