

Counter-cultural stance not on solid ground

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

During the recent world synod of bishops' discussion of the priesthood, a leading member of the U.S. hierarchy advanced a favorite argument of his in opposition to any change in the rule of celibacy.

The church, he said, must be counter-cultural, and celibacy is counter-cultural.

There are two major problems with this argument: one theological, and the other, pragmatic.

Let's take the theological problem first.

The archbishop implies that the only proper relationship between the church and culture is one of opposition.

According to this view, culture embodies values and practices that are at odds with the Gospel. Therefore, culture must be purified, and if it cannot be purified, then it must be rejected and shunned.

In a book that preceded Father Avery Dulles' popular *Models of the Church* by

almost 25 years, the late Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr identified at least five ways in which Christ (and, therefore, the church) relates to culture: Christ *against* culture (the counter-cultural model preferred by the archbishop), Christ *of* culture, Christ *above* culture, Christ and culture in *paradox*, and Christ as the *transformer* of culture (*Christ and Culture*, Harper & Row, 1951).

The Christ-against-culture model calls forth a sectarian idea of church. In this view, the church is a kind of zone of purity surrounded by a corrupt world. Intercourse with that world can only bring corruption to itself.

The Christ-of-culture model emphasizes the harmony that exists between gospel values and contemporary culture.

The Christ-above-culture model underscores the incarnational principle that Christ and the church are at once *in* the world but not *of* it.

The Christ-and-culture-in-paradox model stresses the fact that we live simultaneously in two cities and that a union of the two can only occur beyond history, with the final coming of the Kingdom of God.

Finally, the Christ-transformer-of-culture model emphasizes the doctrines of creation and redemption. The world is essentially good because it comes from the creative hand of God. The world may also be sinful, but it is redeemed.

As in the case of Father Dulles' models of the church, each of Rev. Niebuhr's models says something true about Christ's relation to culture, and yet no one model by itself adequately expresses the richness and complexity of Christ's relation to culture.

The counter-cultural argument, therefore, needs to be situated in a much larger theological context. To suggest that it is somehow normative in discussions of obligatory celibacy for priests, for exam-



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ple, is to ignore the equally Catholic emphasis on the fundamental harmony that also exists between the church and culture.

Nowhere is this latter point more forcefully presented than in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church (*Gaudium et spes*).

But the counter-cultural argument also labors under severe practical handicaps.

It is clear, for example, that U.S. society is one of the most explicitly religious of any in the entire world. In poll after poll Americans attest to their belief in God, in life after death and so forth. And we are among the world's most active churchgoers.

Should the Catholic Church start encouraging its members to be irreligious or to stop attending Mass? Absurd, you say? Perhaps so, but it would also be clearly counter-cultural.

U.S. culture is jealous of the right and proud of the tradition of freedom of speech and of freedom of movement.

Should the Catholic Church restore the Index of Forbidden Books, demand prior censorship of anything and everything written by a Catholic on religious matters, and start requiring Catholics to secure the written permission of their bishops to travel from one diocese to another?

In his thoughtful article, "Catholicism and American Culture" (*America*, 1/27/90,) Father Dulles writes: "Our American traditions of freedom, personal initiative, open communication and active participation can undoubtedly be a resource for the renewal of Catholicism in an age when authoritarian structures, repression and conformity are in general disrepute."

The Catholic Church can be counter-cultural if it takes an authoritarian, repressive and conformist turn. But is that what the church *should* be doing, just for the sake of being counter-cultural?

There are good arguments for celibacy, but none for *obligatory* celibacy. Certainly not the counter-cultural argument offered last month in Rome.

Jesus can perform miracles with what we give him

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

My mother had not wanted me to go and see Jesus. It was nearly a half day's journey from the village where I lived. But she relented when she saw how much it meant to me. I planned to leave before the sun rose.

Just before I set out, she handed me a small basket filled with food.

"To give you strength for your trip," she said as she hugged me.

It was not difficult to find the place where Jesus was preaching. A great crowd had assembled on the hillside near the Sea of Galilee. There were advantages to being a small boy. It was easy to maneuver my way through the people until I found a spot above where Jesus stood.



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Many of the people who came out brought their sick to Jesus. He didn't seem to become tired even though I saw him heal dozens of people that day.

It was getting late and I had not touched a single bite of the meal that my mother had packed for me. I was just about to unwrap the food when it suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't seen Jesus eat anything all day. When I got back home, there was certain to be food waiting for me.

I checked inside the basket and saw five small loaves of bread and a couple of fish. It was a simple offering, but a gift I wanted to make just the same.

"Sir," I said quietly to one of Jesus' assistants who was nearby. "I have a meal here. Can you give it to Jesus?"

Before he could take it from me, he was joined by another man. "Andrew, do you know what Jesus just told me? Go out and buy food for all of these people!"

"With what means?" Andrew chuckled. "I don't suppose Jesus had anything to say about that!"

"If I worked for eight months, my wages would never be able to buy enough to satisfy this crowd!" Philip said as he suddenly noticed me standing there. "Who's this?"

"This fellow has offered his supper for Jesus," Andrew explained, giving me a pat on the head. "Jesus pushes himself to the limit. I'll go and give it to him. At least the master will have something to eat."

Before Andrew could do so, Jesus joined us. "Tell the people to sit down." Then turning to me, he took the basket and said, "Thank you."

Jesus took my loaves and fishes and he seemed to be praying. Then he told Andrew and Peter, "Give everyone here as much as they like."

There must have been 5,000 people who ate their fill that day. When they had finished eating, Jesus told his assistants to gather up the leftovers. I counted 12 baskets overflowing with fish and bread.

What can one person with a little bit do? Not much alone. But when we freely give our gifts to Jesus, the results are amazing.

Scripture reference: John 6:1-16.
Meditation: "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" (Psalm 116:12).

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