

Correcting some out-of-context quotations

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I receive letters all the time from people whose only contact with me is through a single press or television interview. They are not readers of this column, are unaware of the books I've written, and have never attended one of my public lectures.

That's not a problem in itself. Indeed, it would be arrogant of me to think that they have been missing something essential to their ongoing Catholic education.

There is a problem, however, when such people draw defamatory conclusions solely on the basis of a fragmentary quotation in a given newspaper or magazine story, or in a 15-second sound bite on television.

I regret to say that pro-life Catholics are the worst offenders. If, for example, there is a criticism of certain bishops' approach to the abortion issue in the public forum, they conclude that I favor abortion.

For other Catholics, the use of political

terms to explain the conflict in the church is tantamount to reducing the church to a political organization and to denying its spiritual nature and mission.

Ordinarily, I try to follow the time-honored rule: "Never explain, never complain." On rare occasions, however, one has to make the effort.

A recent story in the Oct. 16 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* provides one such occasion. The article is entitled, "Bishops Appear to Have Lost an Abortion Battle as Catholic Politicians March to a Secular Drum."

"The nation's 300 Roman Catholic bishops declared war a year ago on their own politicians who support abortion rights — and evidence mounts that they've lost," the opening paragraph asserts. I was quoted three times in the story, each time out of context.

• "There is no evidence of a single Catholic candidate in America facing

defeat because of pressure he has been put under by the bishops," the first quotation began. So far, so good.

Whether pro-life Catholics are prepared to accept that fact is another matter entirely, but I stand behind the quote and would welcome any evidence to the contrary.

The quotation continued: "It's all over. They (the bishops) lost it."

Out of context, the statement suggests that the fight against abortion in the America is over, and that the cause is lost.

In context, however, I said only that the bishops had lost the battle for this election year.

Indeed, I would hope that, by taking a more positive approach to the abortion issue based on the consistent-ethic-of-life and by establishing healthier relationships with women in the church, the bishops may eventually recover some of their lost moral credibility on behalf of the unborn.

• *The Wall Street Journal* story noted



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that one of the targets of the bishops' ire was New Jersey's Governor James Florio, whose bishop suggested that the Knights of Columbus should not honor abortion-rights Catholics like him. Gov. Florio promptly turned in his membership card.

"Florio's was the best response," I was quoted at this point. "To hell with them, that's what the politicians should be saying. I don't think politicians should be talking in churches anyway."

The quotation doesn't logically follow from the previous paragraph. The reference to the Knights has nothing to do with politicians speaking in churches.

Although I do not recall using the language attributed to me, the first part of the statement was in support only of Gov. Florio's decision to turn in his Knights of Columbus membership card. It had no direct bearing on Catholic politicians' relationship with the bishop.

The last sentence stands by itself — and I continue to stand by it: "I don't think politicians should be talking in churches anyway." And I would apply that rule across the board, Catholic churches and non-Catholic churches alike, and for non-Catholic politicians as well as for Catholic politicians.

• "In recent weeks," the story concluded, "the thunder has faded, and some observers, such as Father McBrien, believe the church has decided to mute its campaign."

And then the closing quotation: "It was medieval and small-minded. Most bishops have been embarrassed and uneasy about it, and they wish it had never come up."

What was "medieval and small-minded?" The campaign against abortion and on behalf of the unborn? Absolutely not.

The reference was to the threat of censures and penalties, and especially the supreme spiritual punishment of excommunication. That has proved to have been counter-productive, as sadly verified by this year's election campaigns.

One can perhaps better appreciate why then-presidential candidate George Bush insisted upon a live interview with Dan Rather on the CBS Evening News. Taped interviews mean edited interviews. And it is the interviewer, not the interviewee, who does the editing.

Grief overshadows Samuel's wait for the Messiah

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Samuel, open up! Hurry, it's me, Benjamin!" a voice called impatiently at the door of Samuel's Tailor Shop.

It took several minutes for Samuel to answer the insistent knocking by his friend.

"You're not still working on the Sabbath? Even God took a rest on the seventh day from his labors," Benjamin joked.

"Did you see the notice posted by our Roman rulers?" Samuel asked. Not waiting for an answer, he continued, "Everyone by law is required to return to their town of birth and be counted for a census ordered by Caesar Augustus."

"I don't care about being counted," Benjamin said.

"You'll care when your taxes are raised," Samuel replied.

"None of that is going to matter for too much longer," Benjamin said. "Have you seen the new star which suddenly has appeared in the sky? Everyone is talking about it."

"I've neither seen nor heard anything about some silly star," Samuel muttered.

"You might have if you didn't keep so



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much to yourself," Benjamin suggested. "It's been almost three years since your wife died. You look as though you haven't had a decent meal in days. Let me take you out for something to eat."

Samuel looked at his old friend. They had been good friends for 40 years. He liked Benjamin, but they couldn't have been more opposite. No matter what happened, Benjamin looked at the world with optimism and hope. But Samuel knew better.

"Benjamin, I appreciate what you're trying to do," Samuel said as he managed a smile. "But how I choose to live my life is my own business."

"Your whole life is about to change if what they are saying about the star is true," Benjamin said, ignoring his remarks.

In spite of himself, Samuel asked, "What are they saying?"

"It's the-herald of a grand event," Ben-

jamin began. "A person of great influence is about to be born."

"What does that have to do with me?" Samuel asked.

"The promise made by God through the prophets is about to be fulfilled! The Messiah is coming!" Benjamin cried out.

"If you expect to me to believe that a star in the sky means that, then you must think that I am very foolish indeed!"

"What I think is foolish is wasting your life like this!" Benjamin snapped impatiently.

"Fine, well if that's the way you feel, why don't you just leave now!" Samuel said.

Benjamin walked slowly to the door. Just before he left, he turned to Samuel and said, "Don't say I didn't warn you. You're not going to be ready."

Samuel closed the door behind Benjamin without another word. It was true that God had created the world and rested on the seventh day. And after that, God had left the world on his own.

Why else would such terrible things be allowed to happen in this world? His own people, the Jews, were being ruled by Romans. Why else would Sara have died so suddenly? God had forgotten the world long ago.

Meditation: Are you ready to receive the Messiah?

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