

Curia officials commit another 'brutta figura'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The Italians have an expression for it: "brutta figura" (literally, a brutish appearance). The expression applies to any public statement or action which makes reasonable people wince and brings discredit upon those who commit "brutta figura."

The opposite of "brutta figura" is a "bella figura" (literally, a beautiful appearance). Those with a knack for the "bella figura" are able to perform an unpleasant task in a way that brings no embarrassment or discredit to either side.

In the Catholic Church before the 1980s and especially in pre-Vatican II days — when the Italians were still in control of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy — curialists with an eye to their own careers would do

everything possible to avoid a "brutta figura." No blot on a curialist's copybook could be uglier.

In those days, the Curia would never have publicly humiliated an out-of-favor archbishop. That would have "looked bad" (brutta figura), not only for him but also for the church itself.

So if, back then, the Curia were to have decided to remove or discipline a sitting archbishop, a high-ranking church official would have spoken to him privately, explained the "awkward" situation ever so tactfully, and then offered him some face-saving alternative, perhaps even a post in the Vatican itself.

The outcome would have been hailed as a promotion or an honor rather than a punishment. Both sides would have been saved embarrassment in a well-executed

"bella figura."

Today, however, there are embarrassingly frequent instances of the "brutta figura," which have hurt both sides, and especially the church.

Take the aforementioned hypothetical case: the removal from office or the disciplining of an archbishop. In the past, such a delicate situation would have been handled deftly (even if not always justly, one must add). No screams. No bloodstains. Smiles all around, even from the victim.

Today it happens in just the opposite fashion. The object of discipline is humiliated. An unseemly dispute breaks into the open, involving even the bishops themselves. The media are drawn in, rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of a juicy story.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

In a sentence, it's one, big, public mess. "Brutta figura."

That's what happened a few years ago in the case of Seattle's Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, who was publicly humiliated by having all of his most significant episcopal powers stripped from him. He was handed over to an unwanted new auxiliary bishop, whose principal assignment seems to have been to keep a close eye on the archbishop and to report any "suspicious activity" at once.

That was a "brutta figura" of the worst sort. The old Italian curialists would never have botched the job so badly.

For starters, they would have had better intelligence. They would have been advised that the archbishop was — and still is — one of the most popular and respected bishops in the entire U.S. hierarchy and a pastoral hero to his own people in Seattle.

Had they known all this, they wouldn't have been surprised by the reaction within the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and within the archdiocese.

But now they have done it again, with another highly respected prelate — Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee.

The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education, headed by the former pronuncio to the United States, Archbishop Pio Laghi, ordered the faculty of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland not to grant Archbishop Weakland an honorary degree at last month's planned convocation.

His "offense" was his willingness to listen to Catholic women on the abortion issue and his criticism of the tone and tactics of the pro-life movement in the United States.

What must the general public think when a well-known American archbishop is humiliated by his church in this way?

We know what seasoned Vatican observers must think: "Brutta figura!"

Samuel finds the kingdom of God within himself

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

Samuel walked with the stranger until they were well outside of the city. They said little to each other. Samuel kept glancing at him, still nervous over where they might be going. Except for his sudden appearance at his door, there was nothing unusual about this man.

"Tell me about this kingdom you are taking me to," Samuel requested.

"Before you can get there," the stranger began, "you must rid yourself of anything that blocks your heart to the truth, especially grievances and grudges."

Samuel was taken aback. "You can ask anyone in the city about Samuel, the tailor. He is known to all as a fair and honest businessman. I've never cheated anyone in my life."

The stranger stopped and looked Samuel straight in the eye and said, "You are an honest man, but you have a big grudge in your heart."

"I bear no grudges," Samuel insisted.

"What about Sara?" he asked pointedly.

Samuel's face reddened. "That I cannot forgive!"

"You have been angry with God since it



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happened," he continued. "That feeling must go or you will never find the kingdom. There is peace and love there which you don't know in your life now."

"How could you ever know how I feel?" Samuel cried.

"Maybe you've been trying to deal with everything alone," the stranger said calmly. "By the way, you are wrong in your thinking that God created the world and rested on his laurels after that. You and everyone else he created have never left his thoughts for an instant."

It was evening by the time they reached a small town. Ever vigilant, the star seemed even brighter tonight. "We're nearly there," the stranger told him.

"I know this place," Samuel said. "This is Bethlehem. You must be mistaken about a kingdom being here in this wretched little place!"

His companion stopped abruptly. "I've

done my job, Samuel. The rest of the journey, you must make alone, if that is your will."

"But how will I find it?" Samuel asked.

"Keep going toward the light and you'll find it," he advised. "It's not really any particular place. Remember all that I told you."

Samuel opened his mouth to protest, but suddenly he was alone on the road outside the town. "I've been an old fool," he said aloud.

He turned back to leave, but the light of the star was like a magnet, drawing him on toward Bethlehem. It was a night of miracles and wonder.

The hills outside of Bethlehem were bathed in the radiant, pure light of the star. Samuel even thought he heard singing. He felt different somehow. He felt as if something very heavy had been lifted from him. Where am I going, he thought? Where is this kingdom to be found?

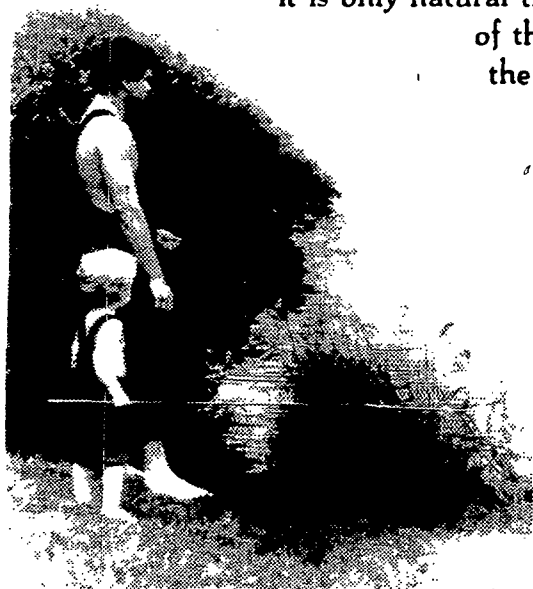
And then for the first time since Sara died, he uttered a short prayer: "Help me, Lord, find your kingdom."

The answer came to him in an instant: Samuel, the kingdom of God is within you.

Meditation: To all who received Him, to those who believed in his Name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

As Time Goes By...

Personal values and traditions tend to shape and mold our way of life. As time goes by, it is only natural that we should be mindful of the past while planning for the future. With the passing of time, we become more aware of the importance of planning ahead. While the preplanning of a funeral is not something that we choose to think about, it deserves our consideration and careful thought. Our staff can explain all the options that you may wish to consider.



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