

Current debates do not focus on core beliefs

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

To hear some people talk, as the Catholic Church enters the final decade of the 20th century and the Second Christian Millennium, it is dangerously divided over matters of doctrinal and moral substance. Moreover, Catholic theologians are primarily responsible for the situation.

I see no evidence for either assertion. When people of that mentality are asked to spell out their list of particulars, none of the issues they raise touches first principles of morality or the core of Catholic faith.

They mention birth control, papal authority, Mary, abortion, homosexuality, feminism, clerical celibacy, and the like.

Each of these issues is serious in its own right, but there are other doctrinal and

moral issues that bring us closer to the core of Christian and Catholic faith:

The existence of a loving, provident, and triune creator-God; the divinity of Jesus Christ and the redemptive value of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension; the healing, renewing, reconciling, and life-giving power and activity of the Holy Spirit; the church as People of God, Body of Christ, and Temple of the Holy Spirit; the sacraments and in particular Baptism and the Eucharist; the forgiveness of sins; the promise and the hope of eternal life; the call to love one another as God loves us.

"When comparing doctrines," the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism declared, "(Catholic theologians) should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order of

'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith" (n. 11).

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of has challenged the core-doctrines of creation, providence, or the Trinity.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of has questioned the divinity of Christ, the resurrection, or the saving effect of his redemptive work on our behalf.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of denies or questions the fundamental Catholic belief in the life-giving, healing and unifying work of the Holy Spirit for our sake.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of has dissented from the doctrine that places the church above any merely



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human organization, that holds it to be, in other words, a mystery and a sacrament of God's presence and activity among us.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of denies the existence of the seven sacraments or questions their salvific effects.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of questions the centrality of the Eucharist, the Real Presence of Christ, or the necessity of baptism for entrance into the church.

No respected Catholic theologian that I know of challenges the traditional Catholic belief in the forgiveness of sins or in eternal life.

And no respected Catholic theologian that I know of questions the fundamental moral truth that love is at the heart of Christian existence and that Christian discipleship is a matter of following in the way of Christ, as a loving, forgiving, patient, understanding, compassionate and merciful master who is at the same time committed to justice for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

These are all matters of the Christian and Catholic core. All else exists for the sake of the core.

Thus, ordained ministry isn't an end in itself; it exists for the sake of the church.

Neither is the papacy an end in itself, as if it were something to be believed in for its own sake; rather, it exists as a ministry to be exercised on behalf of other ministers of the church ("servant of the servants of God").

As important a role as she played in our redemption, Mary isn't an end in herself, an object of Christian and Catholic faith; she points beyond herself to her Son, Jesus Christ, and to the Gospel he embodied and proclaimed.

Birth control, abortion and homosexuality are all important moral issues. But the moral and public-policy dimensions of each issue are more complex than some Catholics think.

In other words, they are not matters of first principles, but of conclusions drawn from first principles, through argumentation and the exercise of prudential judgment.

It is a matter of first principles that life is sacred and that murder is always mortally sinful.

But is killing in warfare murder? Is capital punishment murder? Is the withdrawal of life-supports from a comatose patient with an irreversible illness murder? Is the abortion of a two-week-old fetus or of any fetus before the point of viability murder?

The church may be divided today, but the divisions are over policies, disciplines, styles of leadership, and prudential judgments about complex moral matters, and not over first principles of morality or over the core of Christian and Catholic faith.

Balaam refuses king's request to curse Israelites

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"These Israelites are like a blight on the land!" one of the chief elders said to Balak, king of Moab. "Ever since they left their slavery in Egypt, they have destroyed everything in their path."

"Something must be done," someone else said. "Or soon our fate will be like the Amorites, struck down and defeated with no possessions or land!"

The king said nothing as his chief army officer came forward to speak. "Shall I summon the troops to war, your majesty? These Israelites may be many in number, but they certainly do not possess our skill as warriors."

Everyone at the meeting expected King Balak to declare war immediately on Israel. They were surprised when he finally spoke to them. "There are to be no troops yet. I have a better idea. First we must outwit these enemies. Then we will defeat them."

"How are we to outwit them without an army or weapons?" the chief army officer asked.

"Take two bags of gold and go and summon the prophet, Balaam," the king told them. "All he needs to do to earn this reward is to curse these Israelites before our assembly."

Balaam was surprised to see King



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Balak's advisers standing on his doorstep. He eyed the money greedily after he had listened to the request that was made of him. Even so, he said, "Spend the night here. I must ask the Lord for his advice. Tomorrow morning, I will give you my answer."

The king's advisers were certain that Balaam would agree to the plan. But the next day as they prepared to leave, Balaam said, "No, I must refuse your generous offer. For the Lord will not permit me to go with you."

When his advisers returned to the palace and told him, the king was not convinced. So King Balak sent his closest advisers with another message for the prophet: "Name your price. There is no amount too large to repay you for cursing the Israelites."

This time, Balaam decided to go back to the palace. So he prepared his donkey and set off.

But when the prophet came to a certain point in the road, his donkey tried to throw him. When the donkey refused his prod-

dings to go on, Balaam beat the poor creature. Only the sudden appearance of an angel before him on the road stopped him from his cruelty.

"Why do you beat your donkey?" the angel said to the stunned prophet. "If not for your animal, I would have killed you. The road you are on will be to your undoing."

"I am sorry," Balaam stammered. "Tell the Lord that I will go back." He started to turn his donkey homeward on the road.

"No, you are to go and see King Balak," the angel instructed. "But when you get there, you are to say exactly what the Lord commands you."

King Balak was pleased when he saw the prophet standing before him at his palace. "Come, Balaam, I will show you these Israelites."

Balaam followed the king up to a mountain and looked below. From this vantage point, the Israelite camp looked like a small city that had sprung up in the wilderness overnight.

"Ready?" King Balak asked Balaam. "No, first we must build an altar and offer a sacrifice to God," Balaam replied.

King Balak convened all of the princess of Moab as well as his royal advisers to witness the event. After the sacrifice, Balaam stood up before them.

"How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, and your dwelling places O Israel! God brought you out of Egypt. May all those who bless you be blessed. And those who curse you be cursed!"

The king and his entire assembly were stunned to silence at first. Then a great cry of outrage rose up against the prophet.

"How can I curse those whom the Lord has not cursed?" Balaam said to them before he left.

Even though Balaam finally obeyed God's command, he is still known today as a false prophet.

Scripture reference: Numbers, Chapter 22-24.

Meditation: What things in the world today blind us to God's purposes?

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