

Column nears 25 years of dissenting opinions

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

This column will be 25-years-old this coming July. I began writing it just seven months after the final adjournment of Vatican II, thanks to the encouragement of an exemplary priest and gifted writer, Monsignor John S. Kennedy, former editor of *The Catholic Transcript*, the weekly newspaper of the Archdiocese of Hartford.

If the questionnaires and surveys conducted by my subscribing papers are reliable, the column is widely read and appreciated wherever it's published.

But I know from my mail that the column is troubling for others, a few of whom work relentlessly to get it suppressed. They seem to equate a particular kind of pre-

conciliar theology and devotional life with the faith itself, and consequently regard any criticism of them as an act of disloyalty, irreverence or even heresy.

These critics notwithstanding, my intention has always been to reach the wider audience of educated Catholics (and interested non-Catholics), almost none of whom subscribe to *Theological Studies* or attend the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America or engage in theological research and teaching on a regular basis.

Nonetheless, they are seriously concerned about their faith and they are eager to explore its ecclesiastical and societal implications. But they want to do so in a manner consistent with their own intel-

ligence, experience and education.

The term "simple faithful" is meaningless at best and insulting at worst when applied to such Catholics. Many of them are products of our remarkable network of Catholic schools, colleges, universities and institutes. They are educated adults, and want to be addressed as such.

I know from thousands of their letters and from countless conversations with them over the years that they appreciate open, honest and direct communication about their faith and their church.

They do not like "canned" answers that sidestep or make tight of the hard questions.

This column is primarily for them. It is not intended, therefore, as a conduit for



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official church teachings and policies. Indeed, there is nothing at all "official" about these weekly essays.

I do not presume to represent or to speak for the official church at any level: the Vatican, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, my own archbishop in Hartford, the bishops of the other dioceses in which the column appears, or the University of Notre Dame where I teach.

Surprising as it might seem, I do receive letters occasionally from people who chastise me for "misrepresenting" the church or even "misrepresenting" the University of Notre Dame, as if Notre Dame had an official policy on the kind of bishops being appointed these days or on the need for a Universal Catechism.

This column is not an official instrument of either institution, and not even of the papers and parish bulletins in which it appears.

Then why the fuss?

Some people seem to believe that the primary concern of Catholic newspapers and their writers should not be to "confuse" the poorly educated or antagonize the closed-minded.

As a consequence, the much larger and rapidly growing body of well-educated Catholics is to be left out in the cold, as it were. What is worse, they are to be lumped together with everyone else, as if they, too, were incapable of consuming anything more substantial than theological baby food.

But those who have been educated in the faith beyond the catechism level can tell the difference in Catholic publications between the theological opinion and official church teaching, just as they can tell the difference in the secular press between political opinion and official governmental policy.

It is a serious charge to say that theologians "confuse" the faithful by erasing the line between the official teaching of the church and their own interpretation of that teaching.

For the sake of argument, I will concede the possibility that this can happen occasionally, if those who make this charge will concede the possibility that even Vatican officials and bishops may, at times, also confuse the faithful by equating their own theological interpretation of a doctrine, or moral principal, or disciplinary decree with the official teaching itself — as if no other orthodox interpretation were possible.

My point is that the doctrinal, moral and disciplinary traditions of the Catholic Church are vast, rich and complex. There is greater room for diverse interpretations of those traditions than some Catholics — even officials of the church — seem willing or able to concede.

In the conventional understanding of the word, "dissent" is opposition to an official teaching or policy of the church.

More often than not, however, what we call "dissent" is simply the choosing from this vast history of the church a different, yet still legitimate, interpretation of some doctrinal, moral or disciplinary teaching.

If this column occasionally registers a "dissenting" opinion, it is "dissent" in that fuller and more positive sense. And in any case, it is always a dissenting *opinion*, not official teaching.

I should have thought that distinction was self-evident.

A reluctant Jonah attempts to run away from God

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"You want me to do what?" Jonah cried out to the Lord. "I don't think that I heard you right."

Jonah, the prophet, listened as the Lord repeated his command a second time. "Go to the city of Nineveh. Tell the people that I have seen their wicked ways. Therefore, in 40 days time, I will destroy their city and all of its inhabitants," the Lord said.

Jonah was dumbfounded. How could God ask him to do such a thing? These Ninevites were the longstanding enemies of his own people, the Israelites. Besides, what if they changed their ways and were saved because of his message?

"I'm sorry, Lord," Jonah said flatly. "That I cannot do." Instead of heading for Nineveh as the Lord had commanded, Jonah fled to Joppa, a port town in the opposite direction.

When the prophet arrived there he saw a cargo ship preparing to sail with its load to Tarshish. "Do you have room for a passenger?" Jonah asked the captain.

"If you can pay the fare, then climb aboard," he told Jonah.

Jonah got on the ship and went below deck. He was exhausted from his long journey. In a few minutes, he had fallen into a deep sleep. He didn't even wake up when a violent storm came up and tossed



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the ship like a toy boat on the high seas.

The winds and the rain beat against the ship with such furor that the captain feared it would capsize. "Start hauling cargo overboard, men! We must lighten our load," he said.

One of the crew members went below for more cargo. He noticed Jonah sleeping there and reported it to the captain.

"How can you sleep at a time like this?" the captain said to Jonah as he shook him from his slumber. "Get up. Pray to your God. Maybe he will show us mercy and we won't perish."

Jonah followed the captain and joined the rest of the crew. His heart sank when he heard the captain's next words: "We will cast lots to see who is responsible for our terrible circumstances."

When the lot fell to Jonah, everyone began shouting at him. "What have you done? What are you running away from?"

Jonah looked at them sheepishly. "It's all my fault," he admitted. "I am a Hebrew and tried to run away from God.

That is why this great storm rages against us."

"What can we do now before we all die?" the captain asked him.

Jonah could think of only one terrible solution. "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he told them. "There's no other way out."

At first, the crew tried desperately to steady the ship and sail back to land. All during this time, Jonah kept repeating his advice for their rescue. Finally, they relented.

Just before they threw Jonah overboard, they all prayed. "O Lord, do not hold the loss of this man's life against us."

It was amazing. Not a moment after they had gotten Jonah off the ship, calm returned. The winds ceased and the sea was as calm as a summer's day.

The captain of the ship had already turned sadly away from Jonah's imminent destruction. "Is the man dead?" he asked one of his crew who rushed up to him.

"He must be! Just before we thought he would drown, a huge fish rose from beneath the sea. Jonah was swallowed by this sea monster!"

To be continued.

Scripture reference: Jonah, Chapter 1.

Meditation: Can you really hide anything from God?

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