

# Catholics need to make distinctions

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

My professor of chemistry in the minor seminary (Father Dailey, that's you!) would remind us from time to time of what his own professors in the major seminary had impressed upon him about the need always to make distinctions ("Imprimis debemus distinguere").

With some Catholics it's either a lost art, or a habit they never acquired.

Take, for example, the question of papacy.

Is the papacy, or Petrine office, essential to the life, mission and structure of the Catholic Church? The answer is unequivocally, "Yes."

Is the bishop of Rome the head of the college of bishops, with a primacy and an authority that are not merely honorary? Again, the answer is, "Yes."

If that is so, how can any Catholic, much less a theologian and a priest, ever criticize the policies and appointments of the pope?

"Imprimis debemus distinguere." One can accept the Petrine office as essential to the church's life, mission and structure, without necessarily agreeing with everything every occupant of that office says or does.

Infallibility and primacy do not ensure that a pope will always be theologically correct in his own personal opinions, that he will have an unerring sense of judgment about potential appointments to the hierarchy and to the Curia (the Catholic

Church's central administrative and judicial departments and their officials) or that he will handle difficult and delicate problems in the most effective manner.

The Catholic Church in its 2,000 years of existence has had some first-rate popes, some of them saints — canonized or not. But it is also simply undeniable that the church has had some terrible popes, men unworthy of the office and scandals to the faithful.

In between there have been many ordinary popes — good at some things, poor at others, fair at most.

Does one deny the value of the papacy or challenge the principle of papal authority by conceding, for example, that Alexander VI was a bad pope?

Of course not. Why not? Because we have enough sense to make a distinction. The office is one thing; the person occupying it is another.

What is true of the church and its papacy is also true of the United States of America and its presidency.

Is an American citizen unpatriotic for regarding Richard Nixon as a disgrace to the office because of his complicity in the Watergate scandal?

Is an American citizen inconsistent for praising one kind of president, let us say Franklin D. Roosevelt, while criticizing another kind, let us say Ronald Reagan?

To criticize a president is not to criticize the presidency itself. And to criticize one president while praising another is not in-

consistent; it's simply discriminating.

Take another case: Mary and devotion to Mary.

Is Mary, the Mother of the Lord and the Mother of the Church, an essential part of Catholic doctrine, theology, and piety? The answer is unequivocally, "Yes."

Did Mary have an essential role to play in our redemption because of her willingness to bear the one who would redeem us? Again, the answer is, "Yes."

Does this mean that all forms of Marian devotion and piety are to be accepted, approved, embraced, and practiced — without question or criticism? The answer is, "No."

And if a Catholic does express reservations about certain aspects of Marian piety, is that Catholic thereby opposed to Mary or in opposition to the church's formal teachings about her? Again, the answer is, "No."

Only a person who is unable or unwilling to make distinctions would think otherwise.

One must always distinguish authentic Catholic faith as it applies to the Mother of the Lord from unofficial Catholic piety and devotion which happens to be centered on Mary.

Is a Catholic required to believe that Mary appeared anywhere at all? You name it: La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, and a host of other alleged sites of Marian appearances.

The Catholic Church requires of none of



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us to believe in any of these apparitions. If we wish to believe in them, we are free to do so. But if we choose not to, we are also free not to.

Even if real, these appearances all come under the technical heading of "private revelation." They are authoritative for those who have received them, but they have no authority what ever for those who have not.

Is it possible, even legitimate, for a Catholic to criticize certain Marian devotions or even publicly to express skepticism about certain alleged apparitions? Why not?

Spirituality must always be rooted in sound doctrine and good theology. Some forms of spirituality are utterly consistent with the Gospel; others distort the nature of Christian and Catholic faith.

But to those who cannot or will not make distinctions, it's all of one piece.

To criticize a papal appointment or a papal decision is to attack the papacy itself. And to criticize or express skepticism about a Marian apparition is to deny the place of Mary in the life of Catholic faith.

Such Catholics haven't learned the basic lesson I learned more than 35 years ago in a seminary chemistry class: "Imprimis debemus distinguere."

# Mary has crushed the head of the serpent many times

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 3:20-35; (R1) Genesis 3:9-15; (R2) 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1.

In the world of art, no image so aptly portrays the devil's place after his rebellion as the one of the young Virgin Mary with him under her foot.

What is the relationship between Our Lady and the devil? Obviously, there is none. He fears her and avoids her at all costs. Instead, he preys on her children, attacking their faith in and devotion to her.

The devil fears Mary because God himself has made her his enemy. "I will put enmity between you and the woman." The enmity is not the natural repugnance of woman for the serpent. God plays a part in it. The enmity is a moral one, divinely willed and divinely caused, between the



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

woman and what the serpent represents.

We Catholics have had a rough time in the last 150 years. So-called biblical scholars, especially from Germany, rose to preeminence and began to whittle away our childhood faith. I'm not talking about those wonderful biblical scholars who have given their life and prayers to studying the word of God. I am referring to those exegetes who have been telling us all that we — the saints, the fathers and the doctors of the church — have been wrongly reading the Bible for centuries.

Sunday's first reading is an example.

The whole Catholic tradition has seen Our Lady as the one who would crush the serpent's head. Now, the new exegetes translate a passage to read: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, ... He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel." The new exegetes tell us that the pronoun is neuter and refers to the seed and not to the woman.

Both Philo and St. Ambrose, arguing from the law of parallelism and from the context, maintained that the pronoun should pair with "woman" rather than with "seed." After all, the first confrontation in Genesis was between the woman, Eve, and the serpent.

The bulls *Ineffabilis Deus* (Dec. 8, 1854) of Pius IX, defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and *Munificentissimus Deus* (Nov. 1, 1950) of Pius XII, defining the dogma of the Assumption, both use the mariological interpretation of Genesis 3:15.

Of course the woman's seed, Jesus Christ, crushed the head of the serpent, but he did it through the instrumentality of his humanity. And that humanity, that flesh and blood — the seed that was to come and

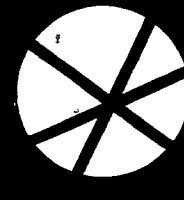
redeem mankind — God drew, not from the dust as he had Adam, but from the womb of the Immaculate Virgin. The Immaculate Conception was the first fruit of the seed's redemptive act. So the real crusher of the serpent's head was the first fruit of the Redemption.

We'll leave the grammatical squabbles to the experts. To us, oral tradition, Catholic sense, and 10 million statues tell us that right smack in the middle of chapter three of Genesis, is Our Lady, the new Eve. Let no one tell you otherwise. If any part of Scripture needs to be read with the faith of a child, it is this passage. Memorize the words, "She shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for her heel."

On Dec. 9, 1531, Our Lady appeared to Juan Diego at Tepeyac Hill, located just outside Mexico City. She wished to be called "Santa Maria de Guadalupe." This title, spoken in the native Indian tongue of Juan, meant "She who crushed the head of the serpent."

At that time the Aztecs worshipped the devil, Huitzilopochtli, depicted as a serpent. Some 50,000 human beings were sacrificed to him each year. Through the intervention of Our Lady, devil worship and human sacrifice ceased and eight million Indians were converted to the faith within seven years.

Once again, she had crushed the head of the serpent.



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