

Many find sexual teachings simplistic

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

From time to time we need to ask ourselves what our real purpose is in teaching, especially on matters pertaining to sexual morality.

Do we teach merely to take pleasure in the sound of our own voices or in the elegance of our written words? Surely not.

Do we teach because it makes us feel morally superior to those whose behavior we condemn? One hopes not.

Do we teach simply because God expects us to? That's not a sufficient motive.

Isn't it the case that we teach in order to share with others the compelling beauty and intrinsic power of Christ's own teaching and example?

Don't we teach in order to enrich people's lives and lead them to true happiness and fulfillment, which is salvation?

Teaching, for whatever motive, is a fact of the church life, but resistance to that teaching is also a fact of church life.

This week's column asks two questions: How can we account for the resistance, and how should we react to it?

Let's take the second question first. Why we teach will determine how we react to those who resist our teaching.

If we teach out of a sense of moral superiority, then we will inevitably conclude

that the resisters are always at fault.

If we teach out of conviction that we have God's pure, unadulterated, perfectly understood word and a mandate to proclaim it, then, of course, we will never question what we teach, nor even how we teach it.

Motive remains all important. If changing minds and hearts is the goal of our teaching, then we have to take account of the way our teaching is received.

Simply turning up the volume induces people to block their ears or leave the room. Making threats breeds resentment and more entrenched resistance.

Even if someone is in agreement with every detail of the church's teachings on human sexuality, he or she can't reasonably deny that these teachings are, in large part, ineffective.

They "convert" only the already converted; otherwise the teachings fall on deaf ears. And large numbers of those deaf ears belong to Catholics.

Why the failure to persuade and convince even our own? If we can't touch the minds and hearts of fellow Catholics, how can we expect to reach those outside the Church?

There are various reasons for our lack of persuasion.

First, many people find the teachings simplistic. Abortion, for example, is pre-

sented as an act of murder — period. The teachings treat all abortions — whether of an embryo only a few days into the pregnancy, or of a non-viable fetus, or of a fully developed fetus only weeks or days short of birth — as the same situation.

Abortion of any kind, at any stage, is the killing of a baby, a child, a person. Many people, however, are put off by the sort of moral reasoning that makes no distinctions.

Secondly, others are put off by insensitivity to consequences.

Many in the pro-life movement insist that all abortions be legally banned, with severe criminal penalties — except, it seems, for the principal perpetrator of the crime: the woman herself.

But if all abortions were prohibited by law, would that put an end to them?

Consider the case of Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, where abortions are legal.

In the United States, where abortion are legally allowed, roughly 3.9 million live births and 1.6 million abortions take place each year. In Brazil, on the other hand, there are 4 million births annually and somewhere between 1.4 million and 2.4 million abortions. (A similar pattern prevails throughout Latin America, where abortions are illegal everywhere except in Cuba.)



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

The abortion rate, ironically, is higher in Brazil, where abortions are subject to criminal penalty, than the United States, where they are legal.

Moreover, in the United States 10,000 women are admitted to hospitals every year because of abortion-related complications; in Brazil the number is 400,000!

Thirdly, people are put off by inconsistency, or at least the appearance of inconsistency.

Abortion, they say, is a "solution" to an unwanted pregnancy. But the church, they point out, opposes almost every available and reliable means to prevent pregnancy.

In countries like Brazil (and Poland) contraceptive devices either aren't widely available or are too expensive for the poor. Abortion, therefore, becomes the contraceptive method not of choice but of necessity.

We can bemoan the fact that our teachings are often rejected or ignored, but placing the blame for it on others won't make the problem go away.

More next week.

Christ must be on our lips, in our hearts

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; (R1) Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; (R2) James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27.

In his farewell address, Moses urged the people to observe the commandments (R1). James and the responsorial psalm urged that people act on the commandments: slander not, harm not one's fellow man, accept no bribe (R2). But Jesus went to the heart of all observances — the heart, that which comes out of a man (R3). It is not what you do that counts, but why; not the mountains you move, but the motives that impel you to move them.

For the Pharisees, religion was primarily external. It was a badge of accomplish-

ment, not a gift of grace. It was a means of dividing society into castes, not uniting it in love. It was a means of putting other people down, rather than a motivation for lifting them up. God was on their lips, but not in their hearts. The Pharisees substituted laws for love; they didn't need God, for they had their traditions.

There's an old saying that you can't judge a book by its cover because the cover may not tell you what is really inside. We could say the same about people. They may look great on the outside, but be rotten on the inside. God doesn't care about how we look on the outside, but how we are on the inside. He doesn't care how religious we look on Sunday mornings. All He cares about is what He sees in our hearts. To Samuel, God said that men see appearances, but God sees the heart.

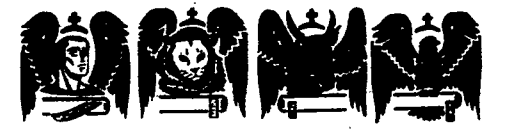
In 1974, the top college basketball player in the country was a young man by the name of Bill Walton. At 6 feet 11 inches, he dominated college basketball. He took his team, UCLA, to its third consecutive NCAA championship, and in his senior

year went on to the NBA. Bill had some adjustments to make in the NBA, and he didn't make them very well. Then abruptly he left the game. He said his heart was no longer in his playing.

After some time, Bill Walton came back. This time his heart was in the game, and he played like it. He led the Portland Trailblazers to their first NBA championship. Then he moved on to the Boston Celtics. Now he's a television basketball announcer.

It makes all the difference in the world whether or not our hearts are in what we are doing! Isn't it true that some people try to live their lives with their hearts in nothing or, we should say, with nothing in their hearts? They have Christ on their lips, but never in their hearts.

For 30 years Mother Teresa has worked in the slums of Calcutta, India. She has worked among the most forsaken people on earth. You and I would recoil from most of the people that she touches every day: the dispossessed, the downtrodden, the diseased, the desperate.



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

And yet everybody who meets Mother Teresa remarks on her warm smile. How, after 30 years of working in conditions like that, does she keep a warm smile on her face? Well, it's interesting. She says that at the age of 18 she left Yugoslavia to become a religious. "When I was leaving home, my mother told me something beautiful and very strange," Mother Teresa once explained. "She said, 'You go and put your hand in Jesus' hand and walk along with him.'" That's been the secret of Mother Teresa's life ever since. She walks hand-in-hand with Jesus. He is in her heart.

Is He in our hearts? Or do we pay Him lip service?

"I want a loving heart more than sacrifice," said the Lord.

Epilepsy course to focus on seizures, social issues

ROCHESTER — The Epilepsy Association of Greater Rochester, Inc., will offer a two-session epilepsy-information course from 7-9 p.m. on Sept. 17 and 24 at the Monroe Avenue YMCA, 797 Monroe Ave.

The information session is open to anyone who is interested in learning about seizure disorders. Fee for the course is \$5, but waivers are available.

Deadline for registration is Sept. 12. To register or obtain more information, call the EAGR office, 716/334-6400, between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

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