

Church can learn from modern culture

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

There is an ongoing argument in the Catholic Church today about the proper relationship the church ought to have with contemporary culture.

At one end, there are the pessimists who are convinced that modern culture is saturated with sin.

Within this group, however, there is a difference of opinion about the church's proper response to the sinful culture.

It can (1) denounce the sin and seek to redeem the culture; (2) denounce the sin and seek to create a counter-culture; or (3) denounce the sin and wring its hands despairingly over it.

At the opposite end, there are the optimists who believe that modern culture is essentially, perhaps even totally, good. The church need only accommodate itself to the culture and learn from it.

In between are those who reject both extremes. Culture is neither wholly bad nor wholly good. It is at the same time holy and sinful.

To the extent that culture is good, the church should accommodate itself to it, learn from it, and even be judged by it.

To the extent that culture is sinful, the church must reject it. But not totally. For that culture is at the same time good and holy.

The task of the church is to heal what is sinful by bathing it in the light of the Gos-

pel, thereby allowing what is good in the culture to wash over and cleanse what is evil.

The Second Vatican Council, not surprisingly, took this "in-between" position.

On the one hand, the council acknowledged the sinfulness of modern culture: its materialism, its easy and brutal recourse to violence, its insensitivity to the poor, its lack of respect for human life, its rejection of the sacred.

Accordingly, "it is sometimes difficult to harmonize culture with Christian teaching" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 62). An understatement.

On the other hand, the council also recognized the presence and activity of God in the events and developments of the modern world (the "signs of the times").

Indeed, the human community "can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture," the Pastoral Constitution declared.

For the council, culture embraces all those human efforts by which we try "to bring the world itself under our control by our knowledge and our labor."

By "improving customs and institutions," we render "social life more human both within the family and in the civic community."

"Finally, it is a feature of culture that throughout the course of time humankind expresses, communicates, and conserves in its works great spiritual experiences and

desires, so that these may be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family" (n. 53).

Culture becomes even a vehicle of revelation itself. "There are many links between the message of salvation and human culture," the Pastoral Constitution declared. God, who is self-revealed most fully in Christ, is revealed also "according to the culture proper to different ages" (n. 58).

There have been, and undoubtedly still are, Catholics who believe that there is such a thing as a single Christian, or Catholic, culture. Some are convinced that we had already achieved a perfect union of faith and culture in the 13th century. Others look toward some future moment in history.

Again, the council has taken the more balanced position.

Human culture, it insists, is never formed independently of contingent historical and social circumstances. There are varieties of conditions for human life in community and there are varieties of patterns for organizing the goods of life.

There are also varieties of ways of using those goods, of working to produce them, of self-expression, of religious practice, of customs, of legislative and judicial systems, of advances in the arts and sciences, and in the promoting of beauty (Pastoral Constitution, n. 53).

Whatever the case, God cannot be confined or limited to any single culture. God



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

is at the same time above all cultures and within particular cultures.

Those who insist today that the church must be counter-cultural should be careful about the way they present their argument. If by "counter-cultural" they mean that the church has nothing whatever to learn from modern culture or that the church is never to be judged by modern culture, they are wrong.

Culture is neither wholly good nor wholly bad. To the extent that culture is good, the church must be prepared to learn from it and even to be judged by it.

In North America we can learn from our culture and be judged by it, without necessarily betraying our commitment to the Gospel.

Freedom from coercion, freedom to form associations, freedom to express oneself even in criticism of our leaders, freedom of information, freedom to participate in decision making — all these cultural values and more have been endorsed in one conciliar document or another.

As always, the proper approach is both/and, not either/or.

Christianity does not promise to take away sufferings

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 8:27-35; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-9; (R2) James 2:14-18.

Sunday preempts the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (Sept. 15). The devotion to the sorrows of Mary goes back to the prophesy of the aged Simeon: "... and you yourself a sword shall pierce" (Lk. 2:35). The fathers of the church — Ephrem, Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard and Ligouri — composed beautiful meditations on the sorrows of the Mother of God.

The feast of Our Lady of Sorrows was approved by Pope Pius VII in memory of his return from imprisonment under Napoleon. The feast emphasizes Mary's role as co-sufferer with Christ. Hence it follows the feast of the Triumph of the Cross (Sept. 14). Both feasts in honor of Christ's cross



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

reveal the two sides of the cross: its glorious side — suffering is redemptive (Sept. 14); and its bitter side — suffering is a sword of sorrow (Sept. 15).

The feast at the beginning of autumn affords us a chance to consider the importance of suffering with Christ. The closer one is to the Christ, the nearer must one be to the cross. Everyone is familiar with the glorious sequence of the Mass: the *Stabat Mater* by Jacoponi da Todi. *Stabat Mater dolorosa, juxta crucem lacrimosa —*

the sorrowful Mother stood weeping next to the cross.

What a consolation to all of us! For suffering is part of the warp and woof of life. Christianity does not promise to take away our sufferings, but shows us only how to sanctify them; namely, by accepting them, as did Jesus and Mary, without complaint and rebellion for the conversion of sinners. Thus St. Peter wrote: "... if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. For to this you have been called, because Christ suffered ..." (1 Pt. 2:20-21) and Mary with Him, though both were sinless and innocent. Note, Peter calls this a grace and our vocation.

One of the great devotions to Mary's Sorrow is to her Seven Sorrows. To St. Bridget, Mary promised seven graces to those who honored her daily by saying seven Hail Mary's and meditating on her

tears and dolours.

The following are the Seven Graces:

- 1. I will grant peace to their families.
- 2. They will be enlightened about the mysteries of God.
- 3. I will help them in their trials and work.
- 4. I will give them what they ask for, provided it is not against the will of my Son or their sanctification.
- 5. I will defend them in their struggle with the infernal powers and protect them every instant of their lives.
- 6. I will visibly help them at the moment of their death. They will see the face of their Mother.
- 7. (Listen to this) I will take them directly to heaven (skip purgatory — what a grace!).

Here are the seven sorrows of Our Lady that we should be thinking about as we pray the seven Hail Marys.

- 1. The prophecy of Simeon.
- 2. The flight into Egypt.
- 3. The loss of the Child Jesus in the temple.
- 4. The meeting of Jesus and Mary on the Way of the Cross.
- 5. The Crucifixion.
- 6. The taking down of the Body of Jesus from the Cross.
- 7. The burial of Jesus.

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