

'Good' coverage in eye of beholder

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

One has heard for years the complaint that the electronic and print media never report good news, only bad.

In its Catholic form the complaint decries the news media's focus on conflict in the church (Father Curran vs. The Catholic University of America on academic freedom; Cardinal O'Connor vs. Governor Mario Cuomo on abortion; gay activists vs. Cardinal O'Connor on gay rights; Cardinal Ratzinger vs. theologians on fidelity to the magisterium; women vs. the bishops on the role of women in the church; and so forth).

Catholic critics ask why the press doesn't report the good news generated by 99 percent of the church's devoted priests, sisters and laity, instead of concentrating on the bad news generated by the 1 percent who "cause trouble"?

The answer is simple. News is what happens out of the ordinary.

It's not news if 50 percent of a parish congregation attends Mass on Sunday, when that has been the average attendance figure over the past several years.

It is news if attendance suddenly drops to 10 percent or if, at the other end, attendance shoots up to 90 percent. The news media will be interested, and so will their viewing audience and readers, because something out of the ordinary will have

happened. And that's news.

In this regard, the Catholic Church is no different from the rest of the world.

Thus, it's not news if a free presidential election is held in the United States, but it is news if one is held in the Soviet Union.

It's not news that people are free to attend the church, synagogue, or mosque of their choice in the United States; it is news when freedom of religion is reinstated in the Soviet Union.

Sunny weather isn't news unless it's part of a record-setting drought, and a rainfall isn't news unless it ends the drought.

Accordingly, it's not news that thousands of Catholic theologians are teaching in Catholic colleges, universities and seminaries without any external interference with their academic work.

It is news when one of them — Father Curran, for example — loses his canonical license to teach Catholic theology on orders from the Vatican.

It's not news when Cardinal O'Connor celebrates the Eucharist in St. Patrick's Cathedral. It is news if, during the course of the liturgy, he is interrupted by the shouts of gay demonstrators. And it would be news if, during his homily, he spoke favorably of the ordination of women.

Catholic critics of the news media often complain that the press is only interested in bad news. But that's not really the case. The media are interested in the out-of-the-ordinary, whether good or bad.

Thus, when the U.S. Catholic bishops issued their two pastoral letters on peace and the economy, the documents received front-page coverage and generous editorial comment.

And when John Paul II made a pastoral visit to the United States in 1979, just after his election as the first non-Italian pope in centuries, the trip was fully covered by network television.

On the other hand, when he returned for a second visit in 1987, the national television coverage was much more limited. Why? Because the novelty had worn off.

If the church wants to be spared bad publicity, it has to generate plenty of good publicity.

But here's the rub. One Catholic's definition of "good publicity" is another Catholic's idea of "bad publicity."

Again, let's look outside the church for a parallel.

In the recent failed coup attempt in the Soviet Union, the hard-liners were discredited, the Communist Party was severely — perhaps mortally — wounded, and the KGB had the public's fingers stuck in its eyes.

To those of us accustomed to the freedoms of a democratic society, such developments were "good publicity" for the Soviet Union. At last, "the evil empire" (former President Reagan's words) was entering the modern world.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

But to those hard-liners who fear the effects of "social permissiveness" and who are concerned about a breakdown of law and order, such developments are signs of a society tottering on the brink of chaos.

The same is the case in the Catholic Church. For many people, the new assertiveness of women in the church, the greater outspokenness of theologians, the stronger emphasis on social justice, and the increasing openness on matters of sexual morality all are signs of health and vitality. Media attention to such developments, therefore, is "good" for the church.

But for other Catholics, these same developments are symptomatic of a widespread malaise in the church. Any media focus on them is "bad" for the church.

And so they blame the media and those who "play to the media."

But this avoids the fundamental question: what constitutes "good publicity" and what constitutes "bad publicity" for the church?

What is at issue here is not journalism, but ecclesiology.

Jesus teaches disciples about service

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 9:30-37; (R1) Wisdom 2:17-20; (R2) James 3:16-4:3.

The great Scripture scholar Lightfoot describes the three prophecies of the Passion in Mark's Gospel as the three tolls of a great bell. Last Sunday, the first prophecy was heard. This Sunday, we hear the second.

It begins the second stage of Our Lord's journey to Jerusalem and crucifixion. The first readings remind us that it is God's own people who plot to destroy Him, as the wicked plot to do away with the just one.

After each prophecy, the disciples misunderstand Jesus. In this second one, Mark tells us that "though they failed to understand his words, they were afraid to question him."

Why were they afraid? Evidently, they were afraid Jesus meant what He had said.

And if He did, it would mean that they, too, would be involved in the Passion in their role as His followers.

Instead, they argued among themselves, "Who among us is the greatest?" The irony of it all! The greatest One among them had just said he was going to suffer, die and rise from the dead.

When they reached home in Capernaum, Jesus asked them what they were talking about. They were embarrassed, so they clammed up. They needed instruction.

So Jesus set about to correct their misunderstanding. "He sat down." Jesus assumes the position of a teacher. Then He "called the Twelve around him." The teacher summoned the students for a lesson.

The lesson was a simple one. Like a good teacher, He used visual aids. He took a little child, stood him in their midst and wrapped his arm around him. The child was a symbol of Christ Himself. The symbolism lay, not in the simplicity of a child, but in its helplessness.

Jesus is the child of God. The Father delivers Him into the hands of men who will put him to death. Jesus, like a helpless child, surrenders; thus the child of God becomes the servant of God. In the Aramaic the word for "child," *talya*, can also mean "servant." His followers, too, must become servants of God, even in the face of death. Such ones rank first in the kingdom of God.

Dr. Charles Mayo with his father and brother founded the world famous Mayo clinic at Rochester, Minn. One time a group of European medical experts were guests at his home. As was their custom in their homeland, the guests placed their shoes outside their bedroom doors to be polished during the night.

Dr. Charles was the last to retire. As he went to his room, he noticed the shoes. It was too late to wake up any of the servants so — with a sigh — he gathered up all the footwear, went to the kitchen and spent half the night polishing shoes.



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

Dr. Mayo was one of the greatest medical men in the world, yet he polished the shoes of his guests. Doesn't this remind us of Jesus washing the feet of His apostles. The greatest must be the servant of all.

A servant is one hired to perform services. But the word servant also can mean a person ardently devoted to another person, a cause or some belief. The mother of a family serves the whole family. The pope is called "the servant of the servants of God."

At the end of Mass, the priest says, "Go, to love and serve the Lord." One serves the Lord by loving others; and one loves others by serving them for the love of the Lord. These are the greatest!

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