

History can be a great teacher in life

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Almost 26 years have passed since the final adjournment of the Second Vatican Council, and a struggle continues within the church about how the council should be interpreted and applied.

Many Catholics may suppose that these often intense conflicts are without historical precedent, that somehow Vatican II is an exception to the rule. Not so.

Imagine yourself back in the fourth century, 26 years after the adjournment of the Council of Nicea (convened in 325).

Nicea was no minor event. It formulated the earliest conciliar teaching on the divinity of Christ and gave us the Nicene Creed. (The creed was expanded later by the Council of Constantinople in 381, and it is that longer creed that we recite at Sunday Eucharist.)

The year is 351. Surely there must be general acceptance by now of the council's teaching that Jesus Christ is "of the same (divine) substance" as God the Father — contrary to the teaching of the Arians that Christ was simply the greatest of creatures.

History tells a different story. Having been defeated at the council, thanks in large part to the leadership of St. Athanasius (then a deacon at Alexandria), Arius and certain heretical bishops were banished.

Soon thereafter, however, the Emperor Constantine — who had originally called

the council and at whose summer residence the bishops met — began to waver from the Nicene faith that he had once so staunchly promoted.

The assumption is that he was influenced by his sister Constantia, who favored the Arian view.

In 328, just three years after the council, the influential Arian bishop, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and several of his exiled colleagues were permitted to return to their dioceses, where they immediately began to work behind the scenes to undermine the Nicene Creed and to discredit those who were faithful to the council.

One of those faithful bishops, Eustathius of Antioch, was deposed and banished in 330, and Athanasius himself, since 328 the Bishop of Alexandria, was exiled to Trier in 336.

That same year Arius was recognized as orthodox and was about to be received back into the church. But sudden death intervened.

A year later the Emperor Constantine himself died, and so Athanasius and some other Nicene bishops were allowed to return to their dioceses.

Unfortunately, the new Emperor of the East, Constantius, was an open supporter of Arianism. His room for action was limited, however, by fear of his brother Constantine, the ruler of the West and a protector of Catholics faithful to Nicea.

Nevertheless, in 339, already 14 years after the council, Athanasius was again deposed from his diocese and fled to

Rome, where a local council validated his orthodoxy in 341.

In the same year the bishops of the East held a local council of their own in Antioch, where a majority, prompted more by political than by theological motives, endorsed four vague and ambiguous statements that tended to favor the Arian position.

Since the Empire was becoming increasingly divided and confused over all this doctrinal bickering, both emperors called a council at Sardica in 343 (we're now 18 years after Nicea).

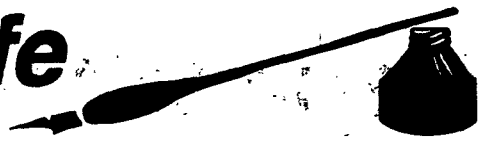
When the bishops who were supportive of the Arian Eusebius saw themselves outnumbered, they left town rather than face certain defeat. Sardica Athanasius was once again recognized as the lawful Bishop of Alexandria and several Arian bishops were deposed.

(Can you imagine trying to keep your Catholic Directory up to date in those days?)

Following Athanasius' return to Alexandria in 346, there was a short period of peace. But only a short period.

Constantine, the protector of the Catholics, died in 350, leaving the Arian sympathizer Constantius as the sole ruler of the Empire. With his brother out of the way, Constantius began to persecute those who had remained faithful to the Council of Nicea.

In 351, the year in which our imaginary journey in time has taken us, yet another council was convened at Sirmium by the followers of Eusebius. A new doctrinal



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formula, conveniently vague in its language, was drawn up to replace the Nicene Creed.

Once again the momentum had shifted to the Arian side. Five years later Athanasius would be deposed from his diocese for the third time, but not the last.

He returned from hiding in 356 when the new Emperor Julian came to power, but Julian exiled him the following year.

Julian himself died a year after that (363), and Athanasius returned, only to endure one final exile between 365 and 366.

Athanasius died in 373, eight years before a new Emperor (Theodosius) convened the Council of Constantinople, which reaffirmed the teaching of Nicea and totally vindicated Athanasius. The Arians, who by now were divided among themselves into three different parties, were banished from the Empire. For a time they enjoyed a following among the Teutonic tribes, but the conversion of the Franks to Catholicism in 496 ended the movement once and for all.

History, Pope John XXIII was always fond of saying, is the great teacher of life. It is also the great confounder of traditionalists, who know so little of it.

Happy are those who obey commandments

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 12:28-34; (R1) Deuteronomy 6:2-6; (R2) Hebrews 7:23-28.

This Sunday's readings focus on the commandments and the laws of God, emphasizing the teaching and learning of the divine law. So many children are raised physically, but not spiritually. They are fed Wonder Bread, but not the "bread of life." They are taught to make a living, but not how to live.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once noticed a curious building being built in New Hampshire. When he had the opportunity, he asked a workman about the architect. "There isn't any architect," the man replied. "We're just building the building. Next week a man is coming up from Boston to put some architecture into it."

A commandment is not the same as an order. Commandments are values for loving more than restrictive laws. To think of them solely as orders is to obscure the sound of love that was heard on Mt. Sinai.

When a mother tells a child not to play with fire, her command is more than an order: it is an injunction of love. So when God tells us to love Him with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves, He is simply telling us the way to happiness. When Jesus said you cannot serve God and money, He was showing us the path to peace and joy.

Howard Hughes wanted only one thing in life: money. He parlayed his inherited wealth into a billion dollar pile of assets. He paid handsome sums to indulge his hedonistic urge. For thrills, he designed, built and piloted the fastest aircraft in the world. In addition to seeking power, he so skillfully dealt political favors that two U.S.

presidents became his pawns.

Yet this man reportedly died emaciated and colorless with a sunken chest; with fingernails resembling grotesque, long corkscrews; with rotting black teeth; and with innumerable needle marks from his drug addiction. He lived in darkness, walked around half naked with his beard and hair to his waist. He spent most of his time watching old movies and drinking soup. Howard Hughes died weighing 95 pounds. He died a billionaire junkie.

Donald Trump admitted recently in an interview on "20/20" with Barbara Walters, "Nothing is what it's cracked up to be."

It is not like that for those who walk in the commandments of the Lord. "Happy are they ... who walk in the law of the Lord." I would suggest we meditate on Psalm 119. It's the longest Psalm in the Bible and it is all in praise of the com-



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

mandments of God.

When Verdi's first opera was being performed in Florence, he stood in the wings of the hall. Throughout the performance Verdi had his eye on one person in the audience: the master composer Gioacchino (Antonio) Rossini. Verdi did not care whether the crowd would cheer him or jeer him. All he wanted was the smile of approval from the master.

So it must be with us. Only the approval of Our Lord matters. And He gives it to those who love Him; namely, those who keep His commandments. "If you love me, keep my commandments."

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