

## Writers misunderstood encyclical

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

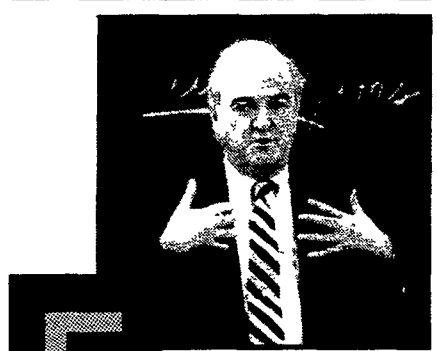
Last May, upon publication of Pope John Paul II's new social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, three neo-conservative writers placed op-ed pieces in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times* within two or three days of the encyclical's official release.

The articles portrayed the encyclical as an endorsement of the writers' own economic views and as an implicit rejection of the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy.

I predicted at the time that — as a result of this carefully calculated act of spin-control — many Catholics in the business community would conclude, without ever reading the encyclical, that there was nothing in the document to trouble their consciences.

Recent comments by William E. Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury and a prominent Catholic financier, tend to bear this out.

In an interview published in the September/October issue of the newsletter *Religion & Liberty*, Simon explains why he helped to form and then co-chair the Lay Commission which produced an alternative statement to the bishops' pastoral.



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

The bishops, he said, "were going off in another direction, and we felt that it was vital to bring our point of view to bear."

"We have been pleased to see," he continued, "that the pope's new encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, shares our views on the inextricable link between freedom and prosperity, underscoring the value of the free enterprise system in promoting both."

The implication is clear: Pope John Paul II is on Simon's side of the argument with the U.S. bishops.

This is simply not true, and Mon-

signor George Higgins, a long-time adviser to the bishops on matters pertaining to Catholic social teachings, has challenged the neoconservatives to back their assertion on the basis of a comparative textual analysis of the encyclical and the pastoral letter.

They have not done so.

Secondly, when asked about the "preferential option for the poor," Simon ridiculed the notion. He pointed out, "Somebody once said that 'preferential option for the poor' sounds like a bad English translation of a bad Spanish translation of a dumb German idea."

Contrast that remark with what Pope John Paul II writes in *Centesimus Annus*: "The contents of the text (referring to his previous encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*) are an excellent testimony to the continuity within the church of the so-called 'preferential option for the poor,' an option which I defined as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity'" (n.11).

Thirdly, Simon congratulates Pope John Paul II for taking "a decisive step in the right direction with *Centesimus Annus*, which stresses that the poor are empowered best through participation in a free economy. That's what I mean by a 'preferential option for the poor':

getting people off the welfare plantation (sic) and into productive work."

Nowhere in the encyclical can I find such an assertion, much less any papal "stress" on it.

What the pope says is that "the more individuals are defenseless within a given society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority" (n.10).

Fourthly, Simon insists that the "best way" to get poor people off dependence upon government is by "letting the free enterprise system thrive." Laissez-faire, in other words.

But the encyclical argues that a society that is neither laissez-faire capitalist nor socialist "demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied" (n.35). Indeed, the pope warns against "an 'idolatry' of the market" (n.40).

Perhaps Simon and I are working from two different versions of the encyclical, or perhaps, like many other Catholic businessmen, he hasn't got much beyond the commentary in *The Wall Street Journal*.

## A boy learns the meaning of thanksgiving

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

Although it was nearly time for the Sabbath to begin, Joel lingered by the town gates. His mother had sent him more than an hour ago to gather wood for the evening cooking fire.

Joel was alone, unless you counted the stray cat that had been shadowing him for the past few minutes and rubbing against his legs. Despite his loud protests, Joel had not convinced the poor animal that both food and affection were sorely lacking. Back home, he had barely enough food for his widowed mother and himself.

"Go on, shoo cat!" Joel said, pretending to be angry.

Joel knew that his mother had been crying earlier even though she had tried to hide it from him. No rain had fallen in Zarephath or anywhere else in the region for two years. Even the brooks had dried up. Not even a morning drop of dew could be found to sustain a single plant.

It all had to do with King Ahab and the prophet, Elijah. Everyone knew about the prophecy. Because of King Ahab's worship of the idol, Baal, Elijah had predicted, "Thus says the Lord, the true God of Israel: There will be no rain or dew in the next few years except at my word."

At first, King Ahab had made

light of the prophecy. But after the first year had passed with not a single raindrop to show for all of his sacrifices to Baal, he had been silenced.

King Ahab issued an order for Elijah to be executed. But, like the rain, no one had seen the prophet for two years.

Why should we have to suffer? Joel thought sullenly as he kicked at the dust in frustration. It was as if God were punishing them, too.

He was just about to turn homeward when Joel noticed a man standing just across the square eyeing him curiously. It was customary for travelers to wait by the gates for someone to offer hospitality. But, strangers were more likely to be found in the port city of Sidon seven miles away. What was he doing here?

Well, if this man was looking for hospitality tonight, he would be hard pressed to find it. Everyone's household provisions were as scarce as his own.

Suddenly, Joel recalled the task that had brought him here in the first place. He picked up a few twigs for the evening fire and hurried away, taking no more notice of the stranger.

"I was worried," his mother looked up and commented as he entered his house. "What kept you?"

His mother was busy preparing the little flat bread cake that had

been their dinner every night since the drought began.

"A stray cat hoping for a handout," Joel said and then he added, smiling, "You worry too much, mother."

By the time that Joel had brought the warm bread back to the table, his mother had already lit the Sabbath candle. She never once neglected the ritual no matter how dismal their circumstances.

"Say the thanksgiving, Joel," his mother said as soon as he had sat down.

Joel scowled. "Why should I say a blessing? God has forgotten us. He will not hear us whether we pray or not."

"Don't say such things!" his mother cried. "We always have something to be thankful for. You have a meal before you tonight."

"And what about tomorrow?" Joel asked angrily. "There is not even enough left in your jars to make another bit of bread. What will we thank God for after that — our death?"

Before his mother could reply, a knock came at the door and she left his bitter words hanging in the air.

"A cup of water for a traveler, I can spare," Joel overheard his mother saying.

As the stranger followed his mother back to the table, Joel recognized him immediately as the man he had seen earlier by the town



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gates. The stranger appeared to recognize Joel as well.

"May I have a bit of bread?" the man asked boldly.

"All that my son and I have left to eat is on the table," his mother said, "but we are happy to share it with you."

The man smiled before he answered. "And because you are so willing to do so, neither your jar of oil or flour will run out until the rains come and the crops grow again."

"But before we eat," he added, looking directly at Joel, "say the blessing. Even in the midst of suffering, there is always something to be grateful for."

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