

25 years after Charles Davis

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

On Dec. 21, 1966, one year after the adjournment of the Second Vatican Council, Father Charles Davis, a well-known English theologian, announced that he was leaving the Catholic Church.

He gave as his reason that he no longer believed in the Catholic Church as an institution. "The church in its existing form," he said at the time, "seems to me to be a pseudo-political structure from the past."

He expanded upon that argument in a book published the following year, *A Question of Conscience* (Harper & Row).

Davis had been for 16 years a seminary professor at St. Edmund's College and later a professor of theology at Heythrop College, both in England. He also edited *The Clergy Review*, was the author of a number of popular books and articles, and lectured extensively in the United States and Canada. Currently, he teaches in the department of religion at Concordia University, Montreal.

Because he was so widely known and respected as a theologian, Davis' departure from the church stunned Catholics in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada and the United States.

Although he reciprocated that respect for fellow Catholics who decided to remain in the church, he may have thought at the time that others would follow him out, as a



matter of "conscience."

Many of those who stayed, he said in his public announcement, could only do so "because they live their Christian lives on the fringes of the institutional church and largely ignore it."

What is perhaps most remarkable about Davis' widely publicized and profoundly unsettling departure from the Catholic Church more than 25 years ago is that so few, in fact, emulated him.

I point this out not to put Davis down, or to make light of his criticisms of the institutional church or of his arguments in support of his decision to leave it.

But there is surely a lesson not to be lost here, especially upon ultra-conservative Catholics who stand eagerly at the exit doors, waiting to cheer the departures of those whom

they brand as "dissidents."

In the often unsettled post-conciliar period, not only have middle-of-the-road, moderate and progressive Catholics remained in the church, but surveys have consistently identified them as the church's most active members and its most generous contributors.

Indeed, the only significant group to have followed Davis' example since Vatican II departed through the door on the right, not the left. These were the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's traditionalist followers in the Society of St. Pius X.

And there would have been even more defections from that side of the aisle if the Vatican had not bent over backwards to hold many of them in.

The compromise package was irresistibly attractive. Those who agreed to break with Lefebvre's movement were given their own new Society of St. Peter in which priests are ordained according to the old rite and the celebration of the Latin Tridentine Mass is the rule rather than the exception.

For these specially favored, anti-conciliar Catholics, it is as if there had been no council at all. The last 30 years of biblical, theological, liturgical and ministerial developments are as blowing sand in the desert.

In his recent review of his own decision to leave the church, published in the Feb. 7, 1992, edition of *National Catholic Reporter*, it is evident that nothing has really changed in Davis' position over the

past 25 years.

He continues to question the value of remaining in the church with the hope of reforming it. "No reform," he still insists, "can succeed unless it directly tackles the question of power within the church and unless it rejects the present distribution of power as a divine ordinance."

But he seems to imply that no one of any consequence in the church — including fellow theologians — has been doing that. If that is his view, he is wrong. And there are many ultra-conservative Catholics who would agree.

If, on the other hand, Davis is only implying that church authorities — bishops, heads of diocesan offices and other members of the ecclesiastical establishment — haven't been addressing the question of power, then he's undoubtedly correct.

Indeed, effective structural change will not take place until a statistically significant number of those within the church's officialdom bestir themselves to action, whether behind the scenes or in the public forum.

Davis is also correct when he insists that if any ecclesiastical structure "is preventing Christians from forming communities that embody the reality of salvation," that structure must be critiqued and reformed, if not replaced.

But only those who remain in the church can do that. And only those who love the church will even want to try.

Do you use God's name in vain?

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

The Second Commandment declares: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God." What, in God's name, does that mean in today's workplace? (Whoops!)

In my opinion, swearing of all kinds — including the use of "God," "God damn it," "Christ" and "Jesus Christ" as expletives — has become a much more accepted practice in many offices, factories, stores and homes. This is an obvious trespass of the Second Commandment, but it may not be the worst.

Father Thomas Paprocki, a lawyer and a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, notes that "it is not only four-letter words banned by the FCC that can do great harm to our fellow human beings. The harsh tone of our voice, the decibel level when opponents are screaming at each other, the well-placed cutting word at a time of strategic vulnera-

bility, the unfounded impugning of a person's reputation, are all ways that we ... offend against the Second Commandment."

Those of us doing the work of parenting are well aware of the harm that breaking this Commandment can do to our children — whether they are pre-schoolers, teenagers, or even adults. There's nothing like hearing a 4-year-old say "damn it!" when angry to make parents look in the mirror and think about what they're doing.

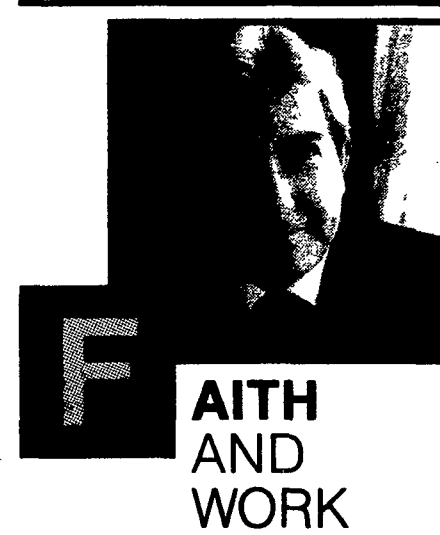
But the Second Commandment is not just about that kind of swearing and verbal abuse. We have seen many cases recently, for example, where we know that *someone* is taking an oath "so help me God," and then lying through his or her teeth.

I point to the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearing, the Iran Contra Hearing, and the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson trials, as only a few in a long list of occasions of perjured testimony that goes back

at least to Vietnam and Watergate — and really to Adam and Eve.

The criterion for testifying under oath no longer seems to be truth, but plausibility or even "deniability": if it can't be proved otherwise, it's OK to swear to it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Christians, at least, would just tell the unvarnished truth in situations like these — even if it got them or their superiors in what our president would call (in an attempt to cuss without using the actual words) "deep doo-doo"?

A case can also be made against many practitioners of religion who claim to have a direct line to the almighty. When Oral Roberts insists that he has been told by God that he will die if people do not donate a certain amount of money for a particular project by a certain date, isn't he breaking the Second Commandment? Or if people claim to know God's mind on issues as diverse as abortion, civil rights or the outcome of Desert Storm, aren't they guilty of misusing God's name?



I'll even take this argument one step further. When people attribute their good fortune in the workplace to their being specially blessed by God or, conversely, when they blame God for some tragedy or misfortune at work, could they be using God's name "in vain"?

Kids' Chronicle crossword answers

ACROSS

1. Darius

4. Peter

6. Joseph

DOWN

8. Zechariah

9. Salome

11. Moses

2. Abraham

3. Samson

5. Jesus

7. Herod

10. Lot

NH NEW HOPE
ADULT
SERVICES, INC.

- Senior Sitters
- Housekeeping
- Companionship
- Transportation
- Shopping Services
- Heavy Cleaning

Give someone you love a gift
certificate to New Hope Adult Svcs.
328-7178