

# Image at odds with modern reality

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

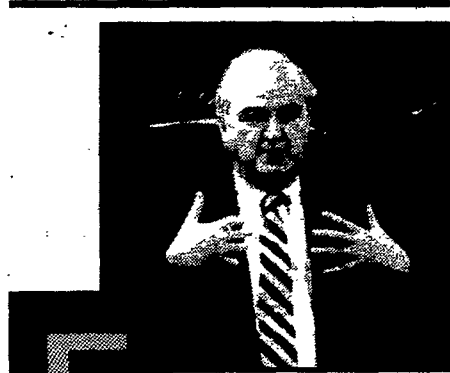
In traditional Catholic piety the months of May and October have had a special Marian significance. Many older Catholics will remember, for example, the annual May processions that ended with the crowning of a statue of the Blessed Virgin.

Although Mary remains "a most excellent exemplar of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ," Pope Paul VI wrote in *Marialis Cultus* (1974), the world and the church have changed dramatically since many of our traditional Marian devotions were first developed.

"Certain practices of piety that not long ago seemed suitable for expressing the religious sentiment of individuals and of Christian communities," he pointed out, "seem today inadequate or unsuitable because they are linked with social and cultural patterns of the past."

The apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* was written to offer guidelines "for the right ordering and development" of Marian devotion — guidelines drawn from Scripture, liturgy, ecumenism, and anthropology. After some 19 years they're still pertinent.

Every form of worship, including Marian devotions, should have a biblical imprint. The texts of prayers and songs should draw their inspiration and their wording from the Bible and above all they should be "imbued with the great themes of the Christian



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

message."

This means that Marian devotions must be free of pious sentimentality, and they should not distort the redemption's true meaning.

In the past, for example, Christ was often portrayed in popular piety as a remote and even severe figure, too far above us to approach with confidence and without fear. Therefore, we went to Mary to receive the mercy and compassion we dared not expect from the Lord.

Marian devotions should always harmonize with the liturgy, not be mixed in some hybrid form. Specifically, novenas and similar practices of piety are not to be inserted into the Eucharist's very celebration.

"This created the danger," Paul VI declared, "that the Lord's Memorial

Rite, instead of being the culmination of the meeting of the Christian community, becomes the occasion, as it were, for devotional practices."

The pope included the rosary in his admonition. He made it clear that "it is a mistake to recite the rosary during the celebration of the liturgy, though unfortunately this practice still persists here and there."

Some readers may remember the time, before Vatican II, when the rosary was actually recited aloud and in unison during the weekday Masses in October.

Because of our new appreciation of the church's wider ecumenical scope and our eagerness to re-establish Christian unity, "every care should be taken," the pope continued, "to avoid any exaggeration which could mislead other Christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church."

Specifically, our non-Catholic brothers and sisters should never have any reason to doubt that, in our Catholic devotions to Mary, Christ always remains our "sole Mediator" with God.

"Devotion to the Blessed Virgin," the pope declared, "must also pay close attention to certain findings of the human sciences." This fourth guideline may be the document's most significant and timely measure.

"The picture of the Blessed Virgin presented in a certain type of devotional literature cannot easily be reconciled with today's life style, especially with the way women live today.

"In the home, women's equality and coresponsibility with man in the running of the family are being justly recognized by laws and the evolution of customs.

"In the sphere of politics women have in many countries gained a position in public life equal to that of men.

"In the social field women are at work in a whole range of different employments, getting further away every day from the restricted surroundings of the home.

"In the cultural field new possibilities are opening up for women in scientific and intellectual activities."

Mary's image in too much popular piety is at odds with this modern reality, and so Marian devotion is in decline. But that image is not accurate, the pope insisted.

Mary was a true disciple. When she heard the Word of God, she acted upon it. She was "far from being a timidly submissive woman or one whose piety was repellent to others."

On the contrary, "she was a woman who did not hesitate to proclaim that God vindicates the humble and the oppressed, and removed the powerful people of this world from their privileged positions" (Luke 1:51-53).

Only when Marian piety is liberated from what the pope called a "sterile and ephemeral sentimentality," can there be any real hope for a renewal of Marian devotion in our time.

The current unhealthy obsession with apparitions, "messages," and weeping statues will not bring that renewal about.

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