

Of assertions without evidence

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Disagreements occur for various reasons. Sometimes they simply reflect a conflict in personality or personal prejudice. One person may not particularly like the other, and so is always ready to take the opposite side on a disputed point. "If he says that, it must be wrong!"

Disagreements also occur when people jump to a conclusion without having all the facts, or by misreading the few facts they do have. Unless personality and prejudice are also involved, such disagreements can be settled by supplying more information.

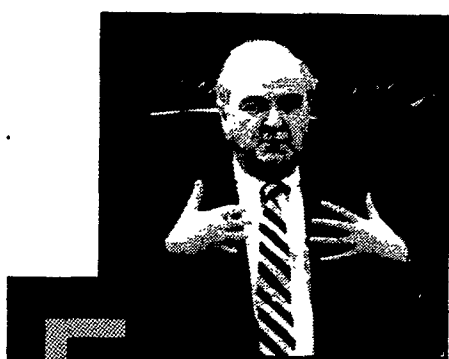
Other disagreements occur when both sides have all the facts but interpret them differently. These are good-faith disagreements regarding issues that lack absolute clarity.

But there are still other disagreements that occur because one or another side holds fast to a conclusion on the basis of unquestioned assumptions rather than on the basis of arguments backed by evidence.

Let me attempt to illustrate this last type by way of example.

During Pope Paul II's visit to Denver in August, several national news programs conducted interviews and discussions on various controverted issues in the Catholic Church today.

One of the best of these programs, ABC's "This Week with David Brinkley," had as guests, in sequence,



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Helen Alvaré, of the United States Catholic Conference, Father Andrew Greeley, well-known author, and Archbishop John Foley, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

Archbishop Foley, with whom I studied in Rome back during the days of the Second Vatican Council and about whom I have several fond memories, was asked the inevitable question about women's ordination.

Cokie Roberts acknowledged that "it is the position of the Vatican that women cannot be ordained as priests because Jesus did not ordain women."

Quoting an unnamed parish priest, she suggested to the archbishop that such a line of argument can be carried

to its "logical conclusion, that only Jews could be priests, that that's who Jesus picked as priests ...What is your answer to that? I mean," she concluded, "we don't do everything in the church according to how Jesus did it."

Archbishop Foley replied, "Well, what the church said is, the church does not consider itself authorized to ordain women, because, as you said, Jesus did not do it. The apostles, whom he called to be his priests, did not consider themselves authorized to do it, and their successors did not consider themselves authorized to do it."

In this instance, ironically, the disagreement between Roberts and the archbishop was based on unquestioned assumptions that both of them accepted.

Both assumed that Jesus explicitly called people to the priesthood (Jews and, specifically, the apostles), while deliberately excluding others (women).

But these are only assumptions, gratuitously asserted. That is, they are statements not backed by any evidence.

While there is persuasive evidence in the New Testament that the notion of a distinct group of Twelve did come from Jesus himself, there is no such evidence that he ever ordained them priests or regarded them as such.

Even by the 50s the church still had no cultic leaders who were called priests. In fact, the topic of the Eucharist appears only twice in the seven undisputed letters of Paul, both

in 1 Corinthians, and none of Paul's letters say anything about who presided at these meals.

Moreover, nowhere in the New Testament do we have any evidence that the Twelve appointed others or laid hands on them to designate them as their successors.

My point here is not to throw into question the ordained priesthood (better: presbyterate) and the notion of apostolic succession.

The church was and remains free to develop its ministries and its governing structure to meet changing pastoral needs and challenges. But that is not to say that each of its ministries as well as its overall governing structure were directly and explicitly willed and put in place by the Lord himself.

There is simply no evidence to support such a view. To insist upon that view in the absence of evidence is to make a gratuitous assertion, not an argument.

One may want to insist that the Catholic Church is right, let us say out of ecumenical concern for the Orthodox, in not authorizing the ordination of women at this time in its history. Fair enough.

But one should not try to support even legitimate conclusions on the basis of assertions made without evidence.

On this and some other difficult issues we have to be careful not to attribute more to the mind, the will, and the practice of Jesus than the evidence allows.

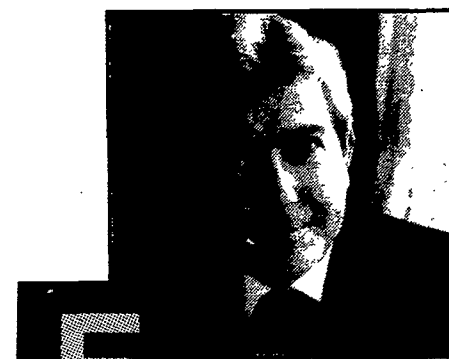
All schools should concern parents

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Should Catholic-school parents be responsible for the public schools in their-area? This is a new and immediate concern to my wife Kathy and I since we put our first children into our parish school's kindergarten program during the same week that Chicago's public schools failed to open on schedule for the fifth time in the last 10 years.

It was a wonderful experience to take little Abby and Nate for their first day of school. Several of their neighborhood friends are in their class, and we felt a familiarity with — and even some small ownership of — the big stone parish school building we entered. We knew many of the other parents (including a couple with whom we had gone to pre-natal class six long years ago) and several of the parish and school staff members.

The school's philosophy presented by the pastor and principal resonated well with both of us. We were pleased



FAITH AND WORK

with both the educational approach the kindergarten teacher planned to take and her integration and advocacy of Christian formation into the overall development of our children.

For all this, we are willing — and fortunately able — to pay the private school tuition required, even though

we already pay large property and other taxes to support the public-school system. Both Kathy (a former Catholic-school teacher) and I believe in Catholic education and are prepared to make the financial sacrifices necessary to provide it for our children.

At the same time, my wife and I realize that many people cannot afford or do not choose to send their children to a religious or private school. As good citizens who live and run a business in Chicago, we know that it is in our best interest to have a good public-school system — even if we do not send our own children to it.

Yet our choice to put our kids in a Catholic school rightly and of necessity will turn our time and attention toward that school. I believe that the same phenomenon occurs with many Catholics. My own parents sent eight children through the Catholic-school system and never bothered much about what the public schools were doing. I have lived in several different dioceses with their own fine school systems, and I never noticed the

church showing much interest with what was happening in the public schools. This is neither a very smart nor a particularly Christian position. While it may be true that private schools should be publicly supported through vouchers or subsidies of one kind or another, this would not mean that there would be no need for a good public-school system.

Yet it could be that, in many communities, the public system suffers in part because Catholics — from bishops and chancery officials to teachers and parents in the pews — do not feel that it is their duty or obligation to involve themselves in the public-school system.

Kathy and I will continue to send our children to our Catholic school. It is, thankfully, still a free country and that is our choice as parents. But at the same time we will have committed ourselves to working, lobbying, supporting, challenging, and, yes, paying taxes to ensure that the public-school system in our city is also the best that it can be.

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