

Good teachers learn from students

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Public opinion exists in the Catholic Church.

"Only people who know little or nothing about the Catholic Church will be surprised to hear this. For she too is a living body, and there would be something missing from her life if there were no public opinion within her, a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be responsible ..."

These words, taken from an address to an International Catholic Press Congress in early 1950, are those of Pope Pius XII.

If public opinion exists in the church, what role, if any, should it play in its teaching mission?

The answer will depend on our ecclesiology. Those who look upon the church primarily as a hierarchical institution, organized in every respect from the top down, will allow no significant role for public opinion in the church.

In their view, truth's path begins with God, passes through Jesus Christ, and then on to his Apostles and their successors, and particularly Peter's successor. The rest of us get it from them. We have nothing to contribute to the process except faithful acceptance.

Public opinion, therefore, says absolutely nothing about the quality of a teaching's content or form. It measures only the ratio of faithful to unfaithful Catholics.

For those who understand the



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

church primarily as the People of God in which the Spirit's gifts are available to the faithful "of every rank" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n.12), public opinion assumes a more significant role.

Because the Spirit is given to the faithful "of every rank," and because the whole People of God are the church, a real or apparent discrepancy between the thinking of rank-and-file Catholics and that of the pastoral leadership can never be ignored or made light of.

In accordance with the first ecclesiology, the teaching process need not take into account the thinking of the rest of the church. In accordance with the second, however, the teaching process has to take into full and care-

ful account not only what the rest of the church is thinking but also how it goes about making up its mind.

A recent study funded by the Kettering Foundation will be of particular interest to those for whom public opinion matters. The study discloses that people don't make up their minds about important issues on the basis of what the authorities and the experts say.

On the contrary, leaders have only limited roles in forming public opinion; exchanges among ordinary people play a bigger role.

"The public teaches itself through an interactive dialogue, not a debate — a dialogue that is exploratory and deliberative with people testing their ideas rather than taking positions and trying to score points against some opponent," Kettering President David Mathews observed.

The researchers concluded that people get involved when an issue is relevant to their own experience. (Thus, few Catholics seem to care when a papal encyclical touches upon something they've never heard of, like proportionalism, but they become intensely interested when the issue is closer to their own experience, like birth control.)

The catalysts that drive people to get involved are often other ordinary citizens who have had some contact with the issue and seem to know something about it.

Facts and statistics are less important to the way people take stands

than whether solutions "ring true."

"The citizens we interviewed have their own internal touchstones for judging what rings true, what makes sense to them," the report declared. "Their judgments about what is authentic has less to do with objective proofs than if something or someone reflects the realities of their lives, ... or if they feel they are being squared with."

Those who believe that truth always and only comes to us from the top down will dismiss all this with a wave of the hand.

But those who believe the Spirit is at work in the whole People of God will be inclined to take the Kettering report more seriously.

Effective teachers know that teaching is a two-way process.

Good teachers are also good listeners. They don't reject different points of view nor do they resent or forbid criticism.

Good teachers know what their students are thinking, and how they think.

If there were no public opinion in the church, the church would be lacking something important to its life, and especially to its teaching mission. Indeed, it would be "a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be responsible ..."

Pope Pius XII said that more than 40 years ago, and Milan's Cardinal Carlo Martini said almost the same thing just last month in Salzburg.

Perhaps there's something to it.

Please Patronize Our Advertisers

"I stopped in for a visit and stayed four years"



Lisa Mancuso, Class of '92
Hometown - Staten Island, NY

When it comes to the finest liberal arts Jesuit college, there's no place better to reach your full potential than Canisius. But don't take my word for it. Prove it to yourself at the Canisius College Open House, November 20th.

OPEN HOUSE
SATURDAY,
NOVEMBER 20TH

The schedule of events from 11:00 am to 3:30 pm includes presentations of academic offerings by Canisius College professors, information about admissions, financial aid, career placement counseling, interviews with athletic coaches, and tours of the campus. Please call 1-800-843-1517 to register.

Canisius
College
Buffalo N.Y.

"A joyful heart is the health of the body."

Proverbs 17, 22

CRUISE THE MEDITERRANEAN

May 14th, 1994

Two weeks on the Song of Norway of the Royal Caribbean Lines. Ports of Call include: Venice-Naples-Rome-Florence, Italy; Messina, Sicily; Corfu, Greece; One port in France with optional side trip to Monte Carlo or Calnes; 3 Islands: Palma, Balearic, and Majorca; and Barcelona, Spain.

Quad Price:
\$2760 per person, outside cabin
\$2640 per person, inside cabin
Triple Price:
\$2970 per person, outside cabin
\$2810 per person, inside cabin
Double Price:
\$3390 per person, outside cabin
\$3150 per person, inside cabin

\$800 per person deposit to reserve triple or quad. \$700 per person deposit to reserve double. Deposits due upon making reservations. Price includes round trip air from Rochester to Venice where you pick up cruise ship, port tax and international tax. Passport Required. Travel Arrangements handled through Calto Travel Bureau.

SHOWBOAT
Sat., Apr. 2nd

It's Spectacular! Don't miss this one at the brand-new North York performing Arts Ctr. in Toronto. 8:14 p.m. includes Dress Circle Seats, transportation, buffet dinner at the Plainsmen Restaurant in Dundith, Ontario. \$90 Deposit must be in by Dec. 1st. Balance due March 7th, 1994. Space is limited. Call Today!

For More Information or to make reservations, Call or write today:
MILDRED MATHIS
P.O. Box 243, Geneva, New York 14456
Phone (315) 789-5612 or
Bonnie Flagg (716) 424-3470 or
Beverly Hadee (after 7pm)
(716) 288-2877