

What makes a Catholic 'fanatical?'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

I can still recall, almost 40 years later, an anecdote my seminary French teacher used to tell about an exchange he had with a taxi driver in Paris.

When he asked the driver if he was Catholic, the driver replied, "Of course." But when he asked if he attended Mass every Sunday, the driver replied in mock horror, "I am a Catholic, yes, but I am not a fanatic!"

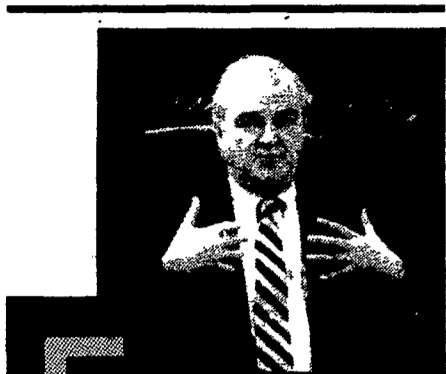
To be sure, the driver's use of the word fanatic was inexact. The dictionary defines the word as "a person possessed by an excessive zeal for an uncritical attachment to a cause or position." Regular attendance at Mass would hardly seem to justify so opprobrious a label.

But that is not to say that the single-minded pursuit of some particular aspect of Catholic faith to the virtual exclusion of all others is unknown to the church.

There are Catholics, for example, who seem almost obsessed with tracking down reported apparitions and other forms of supernatural communication from heaven to earth.

They invest significant amounts of time, money, and energy visiting alleged sites of Marian appearances or of weeping statues and icons.

They collect books, rosaries, pictures, medals, and other religious articles not only for themselves but for



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their relatives and friends as well.

A few of them even take out advertisements in secular newspapers to reproduce a message they believe to have been given by the Blessed Mother, whether in war-torn Croatia, on Long Island, or in someone's backyard in New Jersey or Georgia.

They insist that their intense devotional interests have been the source of great spiritual enrichment and peace, and that may very well be so.

But they are not satisfied with that. They become agitated if their relatives and friends, and especially priests, do not share their enthusiasm or, what is worse, if they should express reservations or skepticism about it.

They can't seem to rest until they have persuaded the uncovered to visit a given site and see for themselves. And they are astonished and heartsick when the resistance continues. For them, it's as if a person on the verge of dying in mortal sin were refusing a last opportunity to go to confession.

Perhaps they forget that the church requires no Catholic to believe in and apply to their own lives someone else's private revelation. We are only bound by the public revelation that is contained in sacred Scripture and in post-biblical tradition, as interpreted by the church.

Excessive single-mindedness, however, comes in different theological sizes and devotional shapes.

There are Catholics, by way of a second example, who are so totally and literally committed to the Gospel's call for simplicity of life that they are prepared to sell all they have and give it to the poor so that they might follow Christ without the encumbrances of wealth and possessions.

The injunction is based, of course, on the story of the rich young man whom Jesus invited to become his disciple (Matt 19:16-21), but who, because of his great wealth, found it too difficult to abandon all that he had. It is the same story that Pope John Paul II dwells upon at great length in the opening chapter of his recent encyclical, "Veritatis Splendor."

For our second "fanatic" (I deliber-

ately put the word in quotation marks, lest it seem more odious than is intended here), dinner is always rice and beans, or some variation thereof. No television sets, stereos, automobiles, or creature comforts of any kind, for themselves or for their loved ones.

The money not spent on luxuries, gadgets, food, and clothing is given instead to the local homeless shelter, and hours of free time are spent there as well, helping with the cooking, cleaning, repairing, or counseling.

Living with either type of Catholic probably isn't easy for those who are less single-minded about their faith. Both types hold us to standards many feel to be very difficult — if not impossible — to meet.

Which is not to say that all types of single-mindedness are roughly equivalent. One type may lead us closer to the Gospel's center than others.

After recounting stories containing different examples of human behavior (for example, that of the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan in the parable of the Good Samaritan), the Lord would often ask his listeners which of the options is closer to God's reign.

Although we don't disagree about that ultimate goal, we often do disagree about the best ways of reaching it. The wisdom of the Catholic tradition has generally counseled moderation: *In medio stat virtus* ("Virtue stands in the middle").

At least it produces fewer ulcers.

Every church should have a 'Father Norm'

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Norm Douglas is my kind of priest. The pastor of St. Martha's Church in Akron, Ohio, Father Douglas is the center of a whirlwind of activity helping people connect their faith with their daily work.

You want work support groups? Father Douglas has some 20 of them operating city-wide in what he calls his "Heart-to-Heart Communications" ministry. Started in 1986, each support group includes a focus on a topic which the group chooses, some input from one of the members or an outside speaker, reflection questions, small and large group discussion, and prayer.

"The emphasis," Father Douglas notes, "is upon practical spirituality — how people actually live out their faith in daily work, activity and relationships."

So far, Heart-to-Heart has reflection groups meeting monthly for business people, children's services workers,



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clergy, counselors, doctors, educators, financial advisers, homemakers, journalists, lawyers, nurses, police chiefs, professional women ministers, sheriffs, and students.

In addition, there is a special group for "people in transition" from one job to another and a "general" group for

those not covered by one of the specific occupational groups.

In addition to the ongoing work support groups, Heart-to-Heart has also organized a four-evening parish mission/retreat called "God Revives Our World" (GROW). "The overall goal of the GROW journey is to foster within the faith community a strong sense of the spirituality of everyday, ordinary life, work and relations," Father Douglas says. "We facilitate a process through which people come to view their work (whatever productive activity they do) as a 'ministry,' a vocation of loving service which is meant to make the world a better place."

The titles of the four major presentations in GROW illustrate its world-oriented flavor: "Where in the World Is Our God?" "How in the World Do We Relate?" "What in the World Do We Do ... and Why in the World Do We Do It?" and "How in the World Can We Make a Difference?"

In addition to these special work-oriented programs, Father Douglas

tries to permeate the faith and work connection throughout all of the programs at St. Martha's Parish. Sacramental preparation, homilies, adult and child religious education, small Christian communities, liturgical celebrations are all viewed as opportunities to celebrate, reflect upon, and encourage the daily work of all the congregation's members.

"We serve as a catalyst in the workplace, in public life and in faith communities for bringing people together to reflect on how each person can better live out his or her own faith vision and values in daily life," Father Douglas explained.

"We encourage individuals, occupations, groups and organizations to come together in heart-to-heart dialogue to foster mutual understanding, to strengthen their public and personal ethics and values, and to provide spiritual and emotional support for those experiencing work-related difficulties."

Oh, that every priest and every parish could say the same.

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