

# 1950s Catholicism had ups, downs

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Those who are inclined to blame the 1960s for all that's bad in our society today (e.g., drug addiction, sexual permissiveness, disrespect for authority) tend also to hark back nostalgically to the '50s as a time of unadulterated goodness.

In some cases the nostalgia is fabricated. Many of those who pine for the good old days of the 1950s weren't even alive then. One would have to be over 40 years of age now, and closer to 50, to have any meaningful memories of that decade.

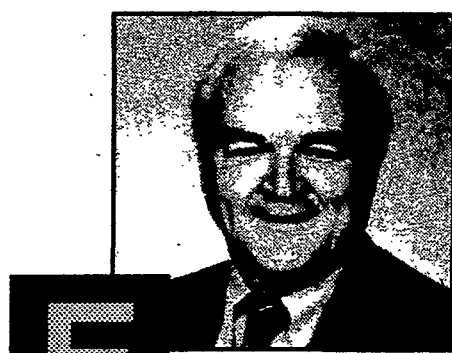
Furthermore, one would have to be 54 or 55 today to have been an adult when the '50s ended, and 64 or 65 to have been an adult throughout the decade.

We should think about that the next time someone under 50 tells us how great the 1950s were and why we should restore them — not only for the good of our country, but also for the good of the Catholic Church.

In reality, 1950s Catholicism was a mixture of good and bad. While it formed, nurtured, and inspired us spiritually, intellectually, liturgically, and socially, there was much about it that has happily disappeared.

The Mass of the 1950s was in Latin. Except for a few quick turns toward the congregation, the priest-celebrant kept his back to the people and his voice so low that even the altar boys could barely hear him.

Those in the pews tended to pur-



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sue their own private devotions, such as the recitation of the rosary or reading from a favorite prayer book. Others glanced at the parish bulletin or daydreamed. Some followed along with a missal.

Because of the eucharistic fast (when not even a drop of water was allowed after midnight), relatively few received holy Communion at the later Masses. And no one — not even the families of the deceased — received at funerals. At weddings, only those in the immediate wedding-party received.

So infrequently did many Catholics receive Communion in those days that the church had to emphasize its law requiring all Catholics to receive at least once a year, during the Easter season.

As for baptism, parental preparation was non-existent. For the most part, the father, the two sponsors, and the baby simply appeared, without appointment, at the church at 1 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. By custom, the mother did not even attend the ceremony.

As for the sacrament of penance, the more devout "went" at least once a month; others "saved up" for the big events, such as a wedding, when they "had to go to confession" because, as part of the wedding-party, they were expected to "receive" the next morning.

By and large the contemporary approach to sin was legalistic and quantitative ("I had two impure thoughts; I told three lies; I missed Mass four times").

As for matrimony, if it were a mixed marriage, involving a non-Catholic party, the rite was conducted in the rectory parlor, before a priest and two witnesses. Later on, it was allowed in the church, but without a Mass.

If the marriage could not validly be performed in the Catholic Church or if the parties decided upon a ceremony in a Protestant church or before a justice of the peace, the family of the Catholic party was strongly discouraged from attending and, in some instances, there was no further communication between parents and the newly wedded son or daughter. Some wounds were never healed.

As for confirmation, since only the bishop could administer the sacrament and since he had many parishes for which to care, it was celebrated

only once every two — or even four — years in some parishes.

For many young recipients, confirmation was a graduation exercise: the end of catechism classes.

As for extreme unction (now the anointing of the sick), the adjective "extreme" was taken literally. The priest was summoned only after all hope for recovery was gone, and his arrival sometimes evoked bitter recriminations against the family member who called him.

Needless to say, Catholicism in the 1950s allowed few significant roles for women. Fully garbed sisters operated for the most part within restricted ecclesiastical zones: the convent, the school, or the hospital. Otherwise they were seen but not heard.

Lay women, heads covered in church, washed and ironed the altar linens, tended the flowers, helped organize bazaars, or were involved in ladies' organizations.

There were no parish councils, no professionally trained directors of religious education or liturgy, no graduate programs for lay women (or men) in Catholic colleges and universities, and relatively few Catholics (almost no women among them) in the upper echelons of business and the professions.

With a Catholic laity that was far less educated in the 1950s than today, commands from on high were more likely to be obeyed, or at least not openly questioned.

Perhaps that's what some Catholics miss the most about the '50s.

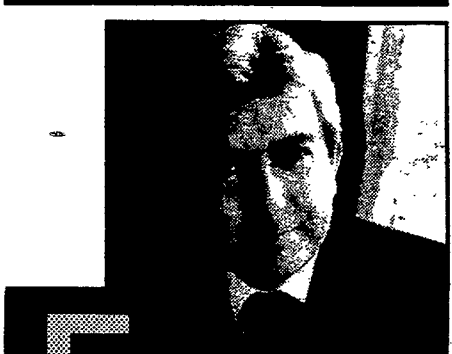
## Choosing a biography is no easy task

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

My first assignment from my new spiritual director was to buy and read a biography — any biography I chose. He did not tell me why or what he expected me to get out of this exercise, but he did assure me that reading biographies is a good way to get at my own spirituality.

So I went over to the new Barnes and Noble bookstore in my neighborhood — one of those new superstores, the kind that has a little coffee shop attached and aisle upon aisle of books on display. The biography section alone must have featured 500 titles.

When I saw this selection, I realized the first point of my spiritual director's little exercise. Out of all these biographies, I had to choose the one person I most wanted to spend several dollars and many hours of my valu-



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able time learning about. This forced me to make a judgment about the kind of person and values I am looking to emulate.

Many biographies were easy to dismiss. I already know more than I ever wanted to know about Michael Jackson, Rush Limbaugh, Madonna, or a host of other celebrities. That eliminated about half the books on the shelves.

I also skipped over the large, historical biographies: Churchill, FDR, JFK, Catherine the Great, Alexander the Great, and others. Not that I don't think I'd have something to learn from their lives, but I wanted to read about someone more contemporary, someone with whom I could more easily identify.

More difficult to ignore were the more traditionally "religious" biographies. I certainly do admire Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other "modern saints."

But I decided that if I am going to be true to my quest to explore a new,

less traditional, more secular spirituality, I should pick the biography of someone who is not religious in the traditional sense, yet whose life exhibits a definite spiritual dimension.

So, after considerable and enjoyable perusing of the choices, I finally purchased *Vaclav Havel: The Authorized Biography* by Eda Krisecova (St. Martin's Press, 1993). Havel, as you probably know, is the Czech playwright and dissident who became the president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic after the "velvet revolution" there.

Although not a Christian, Havel has demonstrated a lifelong commitment to freedom, justice and truth, as well as a belief in the spirituality of his work as a writer and a politician that I find attractive and meaningful to my own spiritual quest.

I'll explain what his biography taught me in a future column.

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