

Theologian deserves honorary degree

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The academic year for Catholic colleges and universities in the United States and Canada has only just begun, but this week's column is already looking toward the commencement exercises that are to be held in each of these institutions next May and June.

Commencement is an annual ritual at which academic degrees and awards are conferred and graduates are charged by commencement speakers to "begin" their careers as scholars, professionals, or whatever.

Commencement exercises also include the conferral of honorary degrees upon women and men who have distinguished themselves in one or another walk of life.

In some cases, honorary degrees are little more than receipts. The honorees may have been generous donors of time or money to the institution.

In most instances, however, a college or university honors people who represent the values of the school or of the religious tradition in which the school is grounded.

One would expect, for example, that Brandeis University in Massachusetts, an institution rooted in the Jewish tradition, to honor those who have a demonstrated commitment to the values proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets of old: justice, compassion for the poor, defense of the powerless, peacemaking, and especially truth-telling even at the risk of im-



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prisonment or death.

Catholic institutions of higher learning are committed to these same values, as well as to the freedom of research and freedom of expression that are required to safeguard and advance those values. Knowledge, after all, grows only through dispassionate and unfettered inquiry, and truth is attained through the critical examination and challenge of accepted ideas, even in matters of faith and morals.

Catholic colleges and universities are not catechetical institutes. They have a different function and purpose. Through the conferral of honorary degrees, colleges and universities put the rest of us on notice that their commitment to freedom of inquiry and expression is as firm as ever.

Accordingly, besides the "safe" degrees conferred upon wealthy donors, a Mother Teresa, a cardinal, a bishop, or other church official, a Catholic college or university should also want to acknowledge and honor those who have stood against the winds of conventional thought — and perhaps paid a high personal price in the process.

But heretofore Catholic colleges and universities have not done so. A few of them may think they have shown a certain measure of bravery by conferring honorary degrees upon Catholic figures such as Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, looked upon by many as "liberal" and, therefore, anathema to some ultra-conservative Catholics.

While every honorary degree Weakland has received was richly deserved — he is a pastoral leader of the first rank — no Catholic institution would merit any special applause for granting it. He is, after all, an archbishop in good standing with the church.

A bolder act of courage would be the conferral of an honorary degree next May or June on Catholic moral theologian Charles Curran, a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, and the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

According to Father Curran's own bishop, Matthew H. Clark, he is "a priest whose personal life could well be called exemplary." The bishop has described Father Curran as "a man deeply committed to the spiritual life"

and as "a respected spiritual guide for people who seek counsel in their journeys of faith."

Bishop Clark attests that Father Curran is "unfailingly thorough and respectful in his exposition of the teaching of the Church" and that he refers to people in authority "in a most Christian manner."

Like many others, Bishop Clark regards Father Curran as a moral theologian "of notable competence whose work locates him very much at the center of (the Catholic theological) community and not at all on the fringe."

A recent profile of Father Curran in *SMU Magazine* reinforces a perception of him that was already firmly in place during his many years as a professor of moral theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

He comes across to his students and colleagues at SMU in the same way that he impressed his students and colleagues at CUA: balanced, fair-minded, and gracious to all.

The title of that *SMU Magazine* article is "Loyal Opposition."

One would think that Catholic colleges and universities should be eager to honor such a distinguished member of the "loyal opposition." But thus far none have done so.

Should conservative Catholics worry that one of these schools might do just that next spring?

Do roses bloom in January in northern Minnesota?

Men, women make circle of perfection

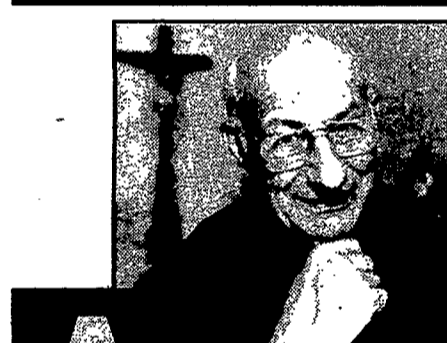
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:2-16; (R1) Genesis 2:18-24; (R2) Hebrews 2:9-11.

Before God created woman, He did two remarkable things for man. First, He put him in the world, a garden of Eden, to work it; and secondly, He subjected all animals to man — for that is what his naming them meant.

The first event suggested man's role: to provide for a wife by working; the second, to become aware of his role to protect her by ruling over the animals. As father and husband, he was to be provider and protector.

Then while the first man was in a deep, deep sleep, God formed woman from him. (How often God works for our good when we are wholly unconscious of it.) God formed her, for He said, "It is not good for man to be alone." Woman enables man to become manly and social. She was to be his partner. So God formed her not from man's head, for she was not to dominate him; nor from his feet, for he was not to dominate her; but from



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his rib, from his side, for she was to walk beside him in life's journey. The rib derives its support from the breastbone, as if to tell us that her relationship to man was to be a love-relationship, wherein she leans on his breast for strength and she in turn strengthens him with her love.

Washington Irving likened a woman to a vine. As the vine entwines

itself to the oak and is lifted high by it into the sun, so should a wife be supported by her husband and uplifted by his love for her. Should lightning strike the oak, searing or riving it, the vine clings to it still and with its caressing tendrils, binds up the shattered boughs. Similarly, a woman binds up her husband's heartaches, softens the stings of the soul, "and lights in this world of sin and pain the lamp of love and joy again."

It is sad, indeed, that some radical feminists would have a woman find her role outside the home. The family is the bedrock of society, and the mother is the family's foundation. Not too long ago when I was defending motherhood's role for women, a woman asked me, "Don't you believe in equal rights for women?"

I shocked her when I said, "No!" After she had recovered from her initial state of shock, I added, "I believe women should have preferential rights." Women should be on a pedestal for men to look up to. Pope Pius XII said society's fate is in women's hands. For women are the object of man's most ardent love. We become

what we love. If she is above men, she raises him up; if below, she drags him down with herself. Women can become Marys or Eves.

The very word "woman" implies she is more than a man (at least the word has two more letters). The author of Genesis tells us that God formed man "out of the clay of the ground" but woman from man's rib, to teach that man must defer to her. She comes last in creation to give the world God's final touch, to adorn creation with the graces, charms, and tenderness no man can ever give.

God made man and woman equal but different. When equality is an effort to abrogate the difference between man and woman in order to create a unisex, then it is not only wrong but unnatural and tragic for society and for man.

Man is only one hemisphere, woman is the other. Only together — especially through marriage — when each contributes what is distinctive to each, is the circle made complete. The circle is the symbol of perfection as is the wedding ring, unbroken by a diamond such as the engagement ring.

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