

Is church 'authentically countercultural?'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

One of the regular complaints of Catholic counterculturalists is that American society is permeated with individualism. While the counterculturalists' criticism may be generally sound, their understanding of individualism is not. It's too limited.

For Catholic counterculturalists, the church is commendably countercultural when it opposes women's ordination, because the culture unduly exalts the rights, dignity, and equality of women.

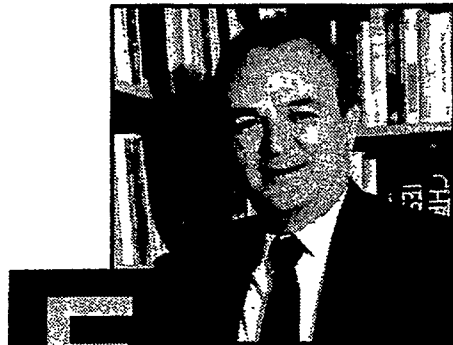
The church is courageously countercultural when it opposes contraception, because the culture glorifies sexual permissiveness without the responsibility of parenthood.

The church is defiantly countercultural when it opposes optional celibacy for its priests, because the culture favors sensual gratification over sacrifice.

The church is bravely countercultural when it reaffirms its teachings on homosexuality, divorce, and abortion, because the culture separates sexuality from marriage, commitment, and the generation of human life.

Catholic counterculturalists tend to place such cultural tendencies under the umbrella of individualism. In their view, our culture is saying to us, "Do your own thing." But the countercultural church says in sharp retort, "Be faithful to God's commandments, even when it hurts, because there is a higher good than the good of the individual."

Let us grant, for the sake of argu-



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ment only, that each of the preceding examples (women's rights, sexual freedom, diversity of lifestyles, and so forth) is a manifestation of an excessive individualism in American culture, that each is in some way at odds with God's will, and that each, therefore, has to be resisted and opposed by the church.

But at least two questions are begged: Is there no more to individualism than its sexual and reproductive aspects? In taking their stand against individualism, have Catholic counterculturalists missed other socially harmful manifestations of it?

A recent survey, published in the Sept. 21, 1994 issue of *The New York Times* and conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, suggests that the American public has become less compassionate about the problems of the poor and

minorities, and more "angry and self-absorbed."

The study discloses a remarkable change in the attitudes of Americans on race and social welfare and a growing resentment against immigrants. Indeed, for the first time in the seven years of the Times-Mirror surveys, a majority of whites (51 percent) say now that equal rights have been pushed too far. Just two years ago, only 42 percent expressed that view.

In 1992, 54 percent of whites thought that there had not been much real improvement in the situation of African-Americans. Two years later, that number has fallen to 44 percent. A similar decline has occurred in the matter of public support for social welfare. In 1992, 69 percent of those surveyed said it was the responsibility of government to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves. That number has also fallen in 1994 — to 57 percent.

A spirit of individualism moves many Americans to oppose any version of health care reform that involves a raise in their taxes, even if the reform would make it possible for millions of uninsured citizens to have some form of health insurance.

A spirit of individualism moves many Americans to oppose any form of gun control, lest it infringe upon their personal right to maintain their own arsenal, even if the absence of gun control will cost thousands of innocent lives.

A spirit of individualism moves many Americans to oppose any restrictions whatever on their right to smoke cigarettes in public places, even

if smoking raises health-care costs and the price of products for everyone, and even if smoking is harmful to those who don't smoke, especially young children and those with breathing difficulties.

A spirit of individualism moves many Americans to oppose any tax-supported efforts to prevent crime by improving housing, education, and recreational facilities, even if the failure to do so would pose continued danger and harm to those who are economically trapped in high-crime areas.

A spirit of individualism moves many well-to-do Americans to oppose any change whatsoever in the Social Security system, even if they have no need for the income it provides and if millions of others would be left without resources should the system go bankrupt.

The examples could be multiplied. One has only to look at Pope John Paul II's social encyclicals or the 1986 pastoral letter of the U.S. Catholic bishops to find many others.

Why is it, then, that Catholic counterculturalists are so limited in their own listing of examples of individualism? Why are their examples almost exclusively drawn from issues related to human sexuality and reproduction?

Counterculturalists tend also to be politically conservative (or neoconservative). Would that have anything to do with it?

If the Catholic Church is to be authentically countercultural, should it not be truly catholic in what it decides to oppose in the culture, regardless of political interests?

One would surely think so.

Celibacy should be tied to one's life work

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Celibacy. Can't live with it. Can't live without it.

This seems to be the quandary that the church has managed to get itself into regarding the priesthood and religious life. I'd like to present a slightly different view of the question from the perspective of a husband, father, businessman and layperson.

It seems to me that celibacy is usually presented as a sacrifice, a spiritual discipline, a special way of attaining holiness. Celibacy is certainly all those things. But so are marriage and parenting.

It is certainly *not* true that celibacy is better, higher, holier or more pleasing to God than marriage. Nor — and this may be surprising to many celibates — it is not necessarily a more *difficult* way of life.

Certainly I do not minimize how hard it must be to be celibate. As a husband and father, however, I have



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also come to understand the challenge of living the married life of intimacy, responsibility and reciprocity at the deepest and most committed level possible. Many times I have envied single people's freedom and independence.

A few years ago, I received a letter asking for donations for the family of a lay missionary in Guatemala who had died in a bus crash on a treacherous mountain road. He left his wife and children penniless and trapped in that country. Of course I sent what I could, but I wondered whether that man had the right to put his family in such a situation. Perhaps, I thought, he should have chosen celibacy if he wanted to do such good but dangerous work.

It makes little sense to me for priests and religious to be required to take the vow of celibacy if they are going to live relatively normal lives — the kind most laypeople live. If they are going to have a job with regular pay, hours, responsibilities and lifestyles, then I fail to see why priests and religious need to be celibate.

On the other hand, there are certain jobs that make it very difficult to be a good spouse and parent. If you want to dedicate your life to the study of deadly infectious diseases, for example, it might be a very good thing to

eschew marriage. Or if, like Mother Teresa, you want to spend your life caring round-the-clock for the poor of Calcutta, then you should probably also choose celibacy. Even some especially dangerous positions in such careers as police work, fire fighting or the military might be better filled by those who have voluntarily chosen celibacy.

The criteria for voluntary celibacy that I propose, therefore, is not whether people choose the religious or the lay life. Celibacy should be an option that is considered by laity and religious alike, based on the riskiness or the total dedication required of the life work they intend to perform.

Under this criteria, celibacy would be neither tied to church vocations nor held up as a higher form of spirituality. Celibacy would rather be an option considered by all Christians as they decide whether the work they want to do — and how they want to do that work — was more compatible with the status of being married or single.



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