

Cardinal breaks papal pattern

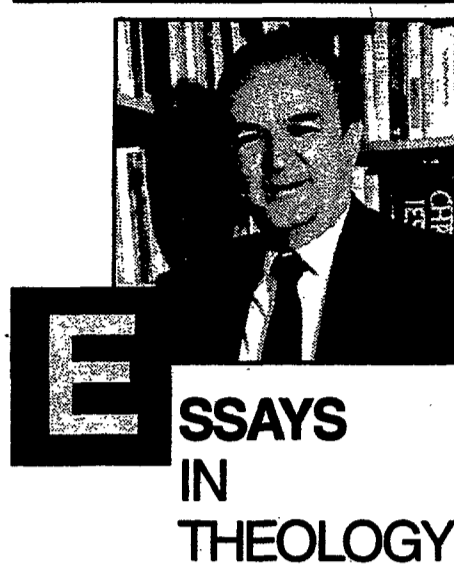
By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Until the new list of cardinals was released last month, the only theologians elevated to the College of Cardinals since the Second Vatican Council were safely conservative in orientation: Jean Daniélou (d. 1974), Charles Journet (d. 1975), Hans Urs von Balthasar (d. 1988), and Henri de Lubac (d. 1991). That pattern has been decisively broken with the appointment of the French Dominican, Yves Congar.

Père Congar is now 90 years old and has been a patient for more than a decade in the Hospital of Invalids in Paris, having suffered for more than three decades from a debilitating bone disease. His last major work was published almost 15 years ago — a three-volume study of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

He began teaching and writing in 1930 and since then has produced some 1,500 books and articles, including "Divided Christendom" (1937), a groundbreaking work in ecumenism; "Christ, Our Lady and the Church" (1952); "Lay People in the Church" (1957), which remains the major work on the subject; "The Mystery of the Temple" (1958); and the two-volume "Tradition and Traditions" (1960, 1963).

When two eminent Jesuit theologians — Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan — died in 1984, many were saying that the age of the theological giants had finally been closed, at least for the 20th century. But they were



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

neglecting Yves Congar.

By any reasonable standard of measurement, Père Congar is not only one of the greatest Catholic theologians of this century but perhaps also the most distinguished ecclesiologist of all time.

At the Second Vatican Council no theologian's influence was greater than Congar's. But that influence was not won without a price.

A prisoner of war in the 1940s (he served as a medical orderly in the French army), he was the object of constant surveillance and vilification by reactionary elements in the Roman Curia. In February, 1954, he was forbidden to teach, and underwent an exile for several months in Jerusalem, Rome, and Cambridge before being given a fixed assignment at Strasbourg from 1956-58.

Congar described those years as a time of "active patience." He did not sulk. He did not withdraw. He did not give up.

Vatican II provided both ecclesiastical rehabilitation and spiritual and intellectual rejuvenation. Pope Paul VI, who was always partial to French theologians and French philosophers, generously quoted Congar in papal pronouncements and welcomed him as a *peritus* ("expert") at the council.

At first, however, Père Congar's role seemed too limited for a scholar of his background and talents, but he participated to the extent allowed him. He said at the time that it was "more true to be within and to work there than to criticize from without."

Gradually he became more fully involved in the preparation of the council's most important documents: the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church especially, but also the documents on revelation, the church in the modern world, ecumenism, religious liberty, missions, and priesthood. The council's teachings on the church's nature and mission bear more than traces of Yves Congar's ecclesiology.

In November, 1984, he was awarded the Watson Prize for his pioneering work in ecumenism, and there was a celebration to mark the occasion at the Dominican Priory of St. James in Paris.

Père Congar's mood was at once honest and humble. He quoted another great French Dominican, Père Lacordaire, a widely celebrated 19th-century preacher: "What will remain in 200 years of what we have written?"

What is important is to have a life."

Congar continued: "I think that my life is rather mediocre, but, too, it is not finished. I still have, at least in suffering, to unite myself to the chalice of Jesus (which is the unique chalice) ... For the rest, I really don't know."

He had come to understand that "whatever we have to ... say, as sublime as it is, it is really not worth much unless it is accompanied by a praxis, by real action, by concrete service and love."

A personal footnote: Perhaps the highlight of my years of doctoral studies in Rome during the Second Vatican Council was an hour-long visit with Yves Congar to discuss possible dissertation topics.

It was a gray and cold November afternoon, and he was seated, in ample white habit, behind his desk in front of a fireplace in an otherwise nondescript room at the Angelicum, a pontifical university staffed by Dominicans. I remember the day well, because President Kennedy had been shot the day before.

Although many stories have circulated about Congar's abruptness and his dread of wasting time, he could not have been more gracious, more helpful, or more encouraging to me.

The red hat's conferral will mean little to Père Congar, given his advanced age and infirmity. But it reminds the rest of us of the extraordinary contributions he has made to theology and to the church, and of our duty to give thanks for them.

God needs but little to do great things

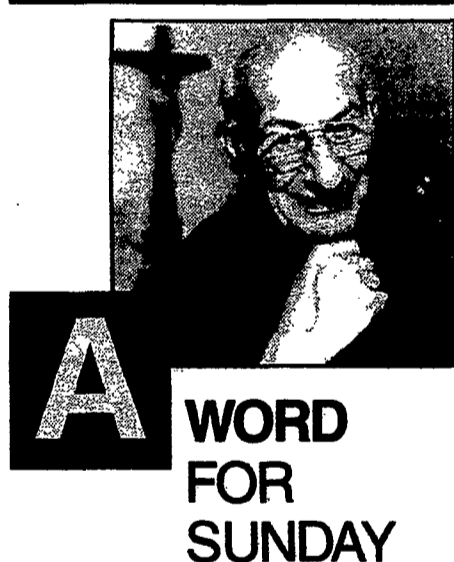
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:39-45; (R1) Micah 5:1-4; (R2) Hebrew 10:5-10.

Sunday's first reading is from the prophet Micah, who will always be remembered as the prophet whose words led wise men to Bethlehem.

Having lived 700 years before Christ, he was a contemporary of the great prophet Isaiah. Perhaps that is why we may know so little about him. When the sun is out the stars fade. Micah was like a star; Isaiah was like the sun. Micah was from the countryside near Bethlehem; Isaiah was from the great city Jerusalem. Micah was a country lad, a rustic, using a homespun dialect; Isaiah was an aristocrat, a great lord in the court of King Hezekiah, using Hebrew that is still considered classic.

In 701 B.C., a powerful Assyrian king, Sennacherib, invaded Judea. The country folk fled to Jerusalem for protection. Panic gripped the city. So both Micah and Isaiah had important work to do there. Isaiah had to stiffen the backbone of Hezekiah and the leaders of the people so that they



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

would not knuckle under to Sennacherib, but would put their trust in God. Micah had to do the same for the common people, who milled about the city in terrified mobs. Isaiah addressed the leaders; Micah, the citizenry.

It was in this context that Micah made his Messianic prophecy. Assyria had come down like the wolf on the fold. Jerusalem was filled with frightened sheep. "Will we ever survive this

invasion?" Such was the sole thought of the panic-stricken people.

"Survive it?" roared Micah. "Why a ruler in Israel shall come forth from the line of David whose greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth." And with a country lad's swaggering boastfulness in the presence of the know-it-all city folk, Micah asked, "Do you know where this great ruler will come from? Not from the city — even so great a one as Jerusalem — but from the country, from the tiny village of Bethlehem — Bethlehem, too small to be numbered among the clans of Judah."

Both Micah and Isaiah kept Jewish patriotism and hope alive with such prophecy. Miraculously, God lifted Jerusalem's siege. As Lord Byron put it: "Like the leaves of the forest when autumn had blown/that host on the morrow lay withered and strown." Centuries later when wise men asked where the newborn king of the Jews would be born, Micah's prophecy was quoted.

In the Gospel, Elizabeth asked, "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

We, too, may ask, "What is Bethlehem that the ruler of the earth should

come from it?"

Who was Mary? Just an ordinary country girl to all outward appearances. Who was Elizabeth? Just an ordinary old woman.

What was Bethlehem? The least of the villages of Judah.

The profound truth in all of this is that when God wants to do something big, He always uses something small.

When God wants to grow trees, He uses a seed. To create a universe, He used just a word. To save the world, he picked the least people in all the world: Israel. In Israel, He picked the littlest province, Judah. In Judah, He picked the smallest town, Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, He picked the smallest inn, a hole in a hill. In the cave, He became the littlest person, a Babe who could not touch the heads of the ox and donkey looking down on Him.

Why? To show us that the most important things in life are everyday life's little things, like saying morning and night prayers, the rosary, daily Mass, monthly confession, kindness between husband and wife, love in the home.

God never needs a lot to do a lot. He needs but little. But He needs that little — our good will, our daily striving to do His will.

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