

A review of a revealing review

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Rarely does this column review a book. Even more rarely does it review a review of a book. This week's column is an exception to the rule, because the review is more than a review. It is an illuminating essay on an often baffling topic.

The review in question, published in the May 14 issue of the Sunday "New York Times," is by Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, editor of "Commonweal" magazine. The book in question is the new biography of Pope John Paul II (Scribner, \$27.50), by Tad Szulc (pronounced "Schultz").

The biography earns a mixed review. When Szulc is writing about the pope's upbringing in Poland, the pressures and personal setbacks he endured in his younger years during the Nazi regime (almost half the book), his successful jousting with their Communist successors, first as Archbishop of Cracow and later as pope, and his efforts at rebuilding bridges to the Jewish community, he receives high marks as a biographer.

"But the Pope is not the world's secretary of state," Steinfels writes; "He is the head of the Roman Catholic Church." This, she says, is "a harder story to tell."

Unfortunately, Tad Szulc — like many others outside the Church — is not up to the task. His grasp of the Church, she points out, is "far less discerning than his grasp of the Polish world," from which he himself



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emerged. His understanding of theology and ecclesiastical issues never gets beyond "formulaic labels and thumbnail sketches." He cannot explain how some theologians who disagree with the pope on this or that moral issue often appeal to the same sources that the pope draws upon.

"Since John Paul II is the church's foremost teacher and a formidable intellectual in his own right," Steinfels observes, "this is a serious shortcoming — like a biography of Einstein without physics."

Tad Szulc senses that something is awry, however. He knows that "the flexibility, imagination and generosity the pope brought to negotiations in Eastern Europe are often missing in his dealings with bishops and theologians. He recognizes the problems

stemming from the pope's remedies for a church in crisis: centralize authority, restrict episcopal collegiality, apply conservative litmus tests in the appointment of bishops, impose restraints on theologians. But the theological significance of these issues eludes him."

Steinfels poses a shrewd question: "Could an intellectual, politically active cleric like Karol Wojtyla become a bishop now?"

The pope's moving words about human rights and the dignity of each individual "drift into the mystical and metaphorical when dealing with similar problems in the church."

Thus, when he first visited Latin America in 1979, he simply accepted the most conservative assessment of liberation theology and Christian base communities: namely, that they were a threat to Rome's authority. This may have been a legitimate concern, "but had it been Poland, a round of negotiations almost certainly would have preceded public criticism."

The same "lack of finesse" characterizes the handling of issues affecting women — from the most difficult (ordination) to the most mundane (like words). Why did the pope, for example, overrule Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law and reject the first English translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which included modest efforts to incorporate gender-inclusive language? Why did he dismiss the sensitivities of many Catholic women (and men) on this point? Tad Szulc provides no answer.

While the pope's biographer depicts him as a devout, intelligent, warm, humorous, and hospitable person, he has no explanation for the pope's hard-line approach to the priest shortage and the much-ignored teaching on contraception. Is it because, as the conventional wisdom has it, that his Polish Catholic background has made him "stubborn and unyielding"?

But that theory doesn't fit Tad Szulc's own exposition of Polish Catholicism's "exquisite adaptability" during the years of Communist domination — in Archbishop Wojtyla's hands as well as in those of many other Polish Catholic leaders.

Does the apparent rigidity flow, then from his early life, growing up without a mother's affection and influence, losing his brother and father by the time he was only twenty-one, doing hard labor in a quarry and a factory during the Nazi occupation?

"Raised to the episcopacy," Peggy Steinfels writes, "he helped redeem Poland and Eastern Europe from the Communists. He saved his family. And he intends to save the church too."

Karol Wojtyla's story is an "amazing" one, and he is indeed a "remarkable" man. But, she writes, "he is not divine and cannot resolve all of the church's problems." And even Tad Szulc concedes that he could make them worse.

"The Catholic Church," she concludes "has survived bad popes and good popes; it can even survive great popes."

Trust is the secret of life

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

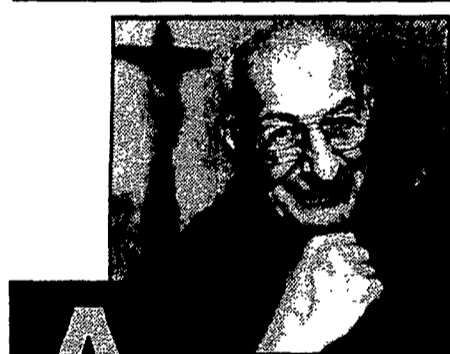
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 16:12-15. (R1) Proverbs 8:22-31. (R2) Romans 5:1-5.

Life is full of difficult questions. One fellow put it this way. "A cannibal is a man who loves his fellow man — with gravy. He shows his hospitality by having people for dinner. It is hard to explain theologically what happens when a missionary on his way to heaven is eaten by a cannibal on his way to hell."

There are many things in life we do not understand. One of the greatest mysteries is that of the Trinity.

It is not hard to understand how there can be three Persons in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is difficult is to understand how the Son can proceed from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from Father and Son and all three are still equal. That is the mystery.

When St. Augustine was writing his treatise on the Trinity, he was walking along the seashore on the coast of northern Africa. Suddenly he stopped and watched a child carrying



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a cup of ocean water to a small hole he had dug in the sand. "What are you doing?" Asked Augustine. The child replied, "I'm trying to pour the ocean into this hole." Augustine laughed and said, "That's impossible." The little child looked him in the eye and said, "It is no more impossible than for you to try to put the mystery of the Trinity into your small mind."

There are so many things in life that we don't understand. Why do good people suffer? Why is life sometimes so unfair? What is the purpose of aging? Why does God not make faith a little easier, and so on? And why can't we understand the Trinity?

Really, the secret of life is not understanding but trust. It's true. We can make ourselves miserable by trying to make sense out of things or we can live joyful lives by trusting in God. An ancient Chinese proverb says, "The bird doesn't sing because it has an answer; it sings because it has a song."

We may not be able to understand the mystery of the Trinity, but we can rejoice that God is not a lonely God — for three is a crowd — and so He did not create us because He needed us, but because He loves us and wanted us to share His happiness. We can rejoice because we know that the Father is life, that the Son is truth, and that the Holy Spirit is love. Life, love and truth are the least common denominator of happiness. So we know that we can possess happiness simply by possessing God.

We may not understand everything

there is to understand, but we understand enough to believe, to walk by faith, to trust.

C.S. Lewis once said that the most frequently spoken word in heaven would be, "Oh." As in, "Oh, now I understand." Or, "Oh, now I see what God's plan was." Or, "Oh, now I see the reason for the trial I went through."

We don't enjoy that luxury in this world now. For we walk by faith, not by knowledge. But one day it will be revealed to us. We will be in the presence of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. That will be something to grasp, being in the presence of all three at the same time! But as St. Paul says, "I know him in whom I have believed and am confident that he is able to guard what has been entrusted to me until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

There are some answers that are too large for our little brains to contain. But our greatest need now is not so much understanding as trust that God is with us and will be with us until that day comes when all will be revealed.

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