

Poverty remains central to spirit

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The Benedictines, the Jesuits, and the Redemptorists have had their respective moments in this column, via three "summer saints": St. Benedict of Nursia (feast day, July 11), St. Ignatius of Loyola (July 31), and St. Alphonsus Liguori (Aug. 1).

Our attention this week turns to the Dominicans and the Franciscans, via St. Bonaventure (July 15), St. Dominic (Aug. 8) and St. Clare of Assisi (Aug. 11).

Dominic de Guzman was a young Spanish priest (more precisely, a cathedral canon) who felt called, early in his priesthood, to organize a counteroffensive against the Albigensian heresy, then spreading throughout southern France at the beginning of the 13th century.

The Albigensians had a particular hold on the poor and the uneducated because of their simple message, their renunciation of worldly goods, and their condemnation of the wealthy and the powerful.

They practiced a rigid asceticism, rejecting all sexual activity, abstaining from meat and dairy products, and engaging in fasting that occasionally was so severe that it would end in death. Like so many extremist groups in the church's history, including today, the Albigensians divided the church into the pure (namely, themselves) and the impure (namely, anyone who disagreed with them).

In addition to a community of women, Dominic founded in southern



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France a community of mendicant preachers which received papal approval as the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) in 1216.

He believed that to be credible and effective preachers of the Gospel, especially among the poor, his priests, sisters and brothers should live an apostolic life — one freed from the care of property; one steeped in both liturgical and contemplative prayer leading to the service of those in need; and one strengthened by communal support.

Among his new order's distinctive characteristics were an emphasis on sanctification through study, especially God's word, and elective government (by contrast, for example, with monks who are vowed by obedience to an abbot, or with Jesuits whose superiors are assigned).

Dominic's charism has yielded a rich bounty of outstanding saints for the church (Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena), some of its greatest artists (Fra Angelico, Fra Bartolomeo de la Porta), and some of the 20th-century's leading theologians (Yves Congar, who just died last month, Edward Schillebeeckx, M.D. Chenu).

Both the Franciscans and the Poor Clares were founded around the same time as the Dominicans (the former by St. Francis of Assisi and the latter by St. Clare of Assisi), and they each received papal approval soon thereafter.

Like the Dominicans, the Franciscans and the Poor Clares embraced poverty's evangelical ideal as well as a concentration on prayer, communal living, and service to those in need.

The poverty question, however, soon tore the new religious order apart. Toward the end of the 13th century a splinter-group known as the Spirituals refused to submit to changes in the rule of absolute poverty. The divisions created were so severe that the movement was formally condemned by Pope John XXII early in the next century. A good thing had been pushed to the extreme.

In addition to Francis and Clare, the great saints, scholars and preachers generated by the Franciscan movement include St. Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, Alexander of Hales, William of Ockham, St. Bernardino of Siena, and St. John Capistrano.

Bonaventure's life as a scholar and teacher was abbreviated by his election as minister general of the Franciscan

order at a time when it was badly split. For 17 years he provided intelligent and conciliatory leadership (a model surely for today's church), and thereby shaped the direction of the order for generations.

He was canonized a century after his death and was named a Doctor of the Church a century later. He is known today as the Seraphic Doctor.

His theological vision was thoroughly sacramental and, therefore, thoroughly Catholic. He insisted, "Every creature, because it speaks God, is a divine word."

In Bonaventure's view, creation is translucent, like a stained-glass window. It reflects a source beyond itself, by means of the divine light that pours through it.

Rational creatures, he argued, uniquely reflect God's being because our spiritual faculties of memory, intellect, and free will are images of the Trinity.

Although humanity lost the sight of its divinely rooted nature through sin, we can still attain divinization by uniting ourselves now to Jesus Christ, who has emptied himself for our sake and has chosen a life of poverty.

Poverty remains central to the Franciscan spirit, insisting that because God has given us everything, we must imitate God by giving it all away.

Dominic and Francis believed this to be at the Gospel's heart and so of the Christian life itself. For everyone, not just for Dominicans and Franciscans.

It's something to think about, even in the dead of summer.

Conscience must be informed by teaching

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

An interesting dialogue about the roles of conscience and church teaching (Magisterium) in moral decision making has taken place in this newspaper during the past few weeks. Part of that debate arose from an earlier installment of this column.

One of the difficult aspects of writing a column or letter to the editor is one never has enough space to consider all the nuances of an issue. Thus, if I write about conscience, I just don't have room to include an adequate explanation of the role of church teaching as well.

I think that's what makes it seem to some readers that I have neglected the importance of church teaching. Similarly, those who read letters to the editor in response to my column can interpret those letters as upholding EITHER the exercise of conscience OR the role of the Magisterium.

Catholic moral teaching is far too complex, and beautiful in its complexity, to be reduced to an either/or mentality. By this I mean that Catholicism has always maintained that we need to



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conduct a dialogue between conscience and the Magisterium in making moral decisions. Each one is incomplete without the other — it is only when held in relationship to the other that either can be understood correctly.

In my classes I sometimes create two caricatures, showing the extremes by which American Catholics often treat the relationship between conscience and the Magisterium.

One extreme takes this sort of position: "My conscience is all I need to make decisions. I don't need to consult any sources of moral wisdom outside myself and what I already know. The freedom to exercise my conscience is supreme, and no authority ought to be telling ME what to do."

The other extreme talks like this: "The church's teaching is all I need to know in making moral decisions. My personal responsibility over my life and obligations is simply to find out what the church says about an issue and then do it. The church's teaching tells me exactly what to do, regardless of the particular situations and circumstances that occur in my life and relationships."

The church's actual teaching on these matters saves us from these two extremes. When the church talks about conscience, it always presupposes that a person's conscience must be "conscientious." In other words, in making their choices, our consciences must obtain as much pertinent information as possible from sources of moral wisdom that help us to choose.

Furthermore, the church has never maintained that magisterial teachings are the single or only source we need

to consult in making decisions. Among the other sources of moral wisdom recognized as helping us to decide are Scripture, the teaching of theologians, scientific information, community standards, and even our imaginations and feelings, which can be sources of moral wisdom as we face the decisions.

Even as we admit, then, that Roman Catholic teaching has held for centuries that it is the individual human conscience that ultimately makes decisions about moral matters, we need to add RIGHT AWAY that we are not talking about a completely autonomous conscience that simply "does its own thing" without regard for the Magisterium or other sources of wisdom.

Similarly, when we acknowledge that the church offers us an authoritative teaching in moral matters, we are not concluding that we are exempt from weighing the particular situations we face, our own intentions and goals before God, or the meaning of individual actions in the concrete reality of our lives when we come to make a decision.

To take either of these positions would be to oversimplify a gloriously nuanced tradition of genuine moral wisdom.

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