

## COLUMNISTS

## Catholic orthodoxy has its limits

An article in the *Washington Post* last month remarked on the discrepancy between Pope John Paul II's undoubted popularity as a world leader and the opposition of millions of Catholics (e.g., in Ireland, Poland, Germany, Austria, the United States) to some of his most firmly held views — on women's ordination, clerical celibacy, and full Eucharistic participation for divorced-and-remarried Catholics.

The article cited a comment by an oft-quoted Catholic layman on the issue of theological pluralism, with specific reference to the reaction of some theologians to the Vatican's recent reaffirmation of its teaching on the ordination of women.

The pope, it was said, has long tried to declare some questions settled, but he is constantly being challenged by theologians who "see no limits."

Having been interviewed more times than I could possibly recall, I know what it is to have a 20- or 30-minute conversation reduced to five or 10 words. That reservation notwithstanding, the comment calls for further reflection.

Is it really the case that theologians, particularly those who may have commented on the recent statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "see no limits" to Catholic orthodoxy?



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

There may be a few theologians around — I mean *real* theologians with theological doctorates, teaching positions, and a publications record — who fit the peculiar profile of Catholic scholars and teachers who "see no limits" to Catholic orthodoxy. But I'm not aware of any.

Prominent theologians who have commented thus far on the Vatican statement — internationally recognized figures like Nicholas Lash of Cambridge University or Francis Sullivan, SJ, of Boston College and for 36 years before that on the faculty of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome — fall nowhere near that category.

Let it be said yet one more time: There are limits to Catholic orthodoxy. I know of no Catholic theologian who

would disagree.

For example, it is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny the reality of God — of the sacred, the holy, the supernatural, the transcendent.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny the triune nature of God.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that the triune God created us and all that exists, redeemed us and sanctifies us.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that the triune God providentially guides us toward the final reign of God.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that Jesus Christ is a divine Person with both a human and a divine nature.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that Jesus Christ redeemed us by his death on the cross and his resurrection.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that human nature is fallen, but redeemed, and that grace is more powerful than sin.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that salvation is a gift of God and that human freedom is required to accept or reject that gift.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that the church is more

than a purely human organization or community, that it is a mystery, i.e., a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny the spiritual efficacy of the seven sacraments.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that Jesus Christ is sacramentally present in the Eucharist: "body, blood, soul, and divinity."

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny any link between Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross and in the whole Paschal Mystery, and the sacramental celebration of that sacrifice in the Eucharist.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny that baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation (penance), anointing of the sick, marriage, and holy orders are sacraments of the church: signs and instruments of Christ's saving activity on our behalf.

It is beyond the limits of Catholic orthodoxy to deny any basis for our hope in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

It is always a mistake to assert a universal negative (as in "see no limits"), because even one exception undermines the validity of the assertion. In this case, there are scores of exceptions.

## Letting the light shine forth

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 4:12-23. (R1) Isaiah 8:23, 9:3. (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17.

Light is the theme of Sunday's readings.

Isaiah's vision in the first reading came at a time of national crisis. The fearful Assyrians were on the move about 743 B.C. As Byron wrote in his "Destruction of Sennacherib":

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,*

*His cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;*

*The sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,*

*When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.*

*Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,*

*That host at sunset with their banners was seen...*

As those Assyrians ravaged the northern kingdom of Israel, the first tribes to feel the brunt of their attack were the two tribes in Galilee: Zebulun and Naphthali.

With their usual cruelty, the Assyrians blinded many of their captives: hence Isaiah's, "the people who walked in darkness." Others were deported to Nineveh, and heathen colonists from the far East were sent in to take their place; thus Isaiah's "District of the Gentiles."

In this hour of national calamity, Isaiah foresaw the day when a great light



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

would shine, dispelling the darkness and bringing joy as at a harvest festival or as when spoils were divided after a great victory.

The responsorial refrain says that this saving light is the Lord; and the Gospel says this Lord was Jesus.

There were two reasons why Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. First, Galilee was densely populated. In the time of Jesus, it had more than 204 villages — each one averaging more than 15,000 people. Thus in an area no larger than 25 miles by 50 miles, there were three million people.

Secondly, Galileans were open to new ideas. The word "galilee" in Hebrew means circle — the country was circle-shaped, encircled by heathen nations: Phoenicia, Syria and Samaria. Contact with the pagan world made the Galileans open to new teachings, more than their brothers in Judea. In fact, Jesus was better received in Galilee than in Judea.

The Gospel is good news because it is light. It proclaims the light of truth — the truth that leads to happiness, life and heaven. It is good news, because it was meant not only for the people of his day but for all peoples, that was why Jesus called disciples to be with him.

St. Paul said we can bring the good news to others if we work for unity and harmony with others. "Let there be no factions ... or quarreling among yourselves."

When Michelangelo was working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he always had the candle in his cap fixed in such a way that his shadow would never fall upon his painting. So we must never let our egoism get between us and loving others.

Paul spoke of quarreling. The word he used suggests simply differences of opinion or jealousy or bickering, not major doctrinal differences. Making mountains out of molehills: how often we do that.

The weapon of the devil is to divide and conquer. Dissension in a community sends out a negative message: Why go to a church where everybody is always fighting?

A teacher asked her first grade class, "How many want to go to heaven?"

Everybody raised his hand but one boy.

"Don't you want to go to heaven, John?" the teacher asked.

"Sure, Sister, but not with this bunch."

Tiny drops fill the ocean, tiny blades

of grass form the lawn, tiny bricks make houses, and ordinary people make the church — but only if they are united in love.

Harry Lauder, the Scottish comedian, liked to tell of the old lamplighter who each evening passed his home and lit the gas lamps. As he made his way down the street, the lad would lose sight of the lamplighter. "But," he explained, "I always knew where he was by the avenue of light he left behind him."

We too must be lamplighters, leaving a trail of light behind us in the world, for a saint is only a person through whom the light shines — the light of the good works of love and peace and harmony.

## Daily Readings

Monday, Jan. 22

2 Sm 5:1-7, 10; Mk 3:22-30

Tuesday, Jan. 23

2 Sm 6:12-15, 17-19;

Mk 3:31-35

Wednesday, Jan. 24

1 Sm 7:4-17; Mk 4:1-20

Thursday, Jan. 25

Acts 22:3-15 or 9:1-22;

Mk 16:15-18

Friday, Jan. 26

2 Tm 1:1-8 or Ti 1:1-5; Lk 10:1-

9 or Mk 4:26-34

Saturday, Jan. 27

2 Sm 12:1-7, 10-17; Mk 4:35-41

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