

COLUMNISTS

Cultural issues beg look at both sides

There seems to be a newly intense feeling abroad among some Christians that religion is not accorded proper respect in U.S. society, and that American culture is at once alien and hostile to religious faith and values.

They point to cultural and legal setbacks on such issues as abortion, physician-assisted suicide, homosexuality and same-sex marriages, divorce, sexual explicitness in the media, and the mockery of religious institutions and their representatives by the media and the entertainment industry.

Catholics among these critics cite the recent film "Primal Fear," which depicts a cardinal-archbishop as a pervert who enjoys videotaping individuals in sexually provocative situations and is later murdered by one of his resentful performers.

They also complain about a recent HBO television documentary on sexual abuse among the Catholic clergy, entitled "Priestly Sins: Sex and the Church."

A few years ago it was the filmed version of "The Last Temptation of Christ" that brought out the protests and the pickets.

Perhaps some of these Catholics miss the culture represented in such 1940s movies as "Going My Way" and "The Bells of St. Mary's" that depicted pastors as aged, thick-brogued Irishmen apparently spending most of their day shuffling aimlessly around the rectory in cas-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

sock and biretta (Barry Fitzgerald) and young curates as consumed with the task of transforming ordinary street kids into an angelic choir (Bing Crosby).

Those were simpler times, of course, but did they also have a more refined sense of morality? Not if we acknowledge a bit of truth in the adage that virtue is too often no more than the lack of opportunity.

Willy Sutton, a figure out of that simpler and supposedly culture-friendly time, used to say that he robbed banks because that's where the money was. But computer technology makes it possible now, without having to brandish a machine gun or operate a high-speed drill, to steal huge sums of money in a manner that would have boggled Sutton's mind. The real money today isn't in the bank vault; it's on the Internet.

But however people steal it, they're still crooks. Only the means and the quantities have changed.

A clerical spokesman for the U.S. Catholic bishops, Msgr. Francis Maniscalco, has recently taken one Catholic critic gently to task in a letter to *Commonweal* magazine (6/1/96), in which he reminds us that there are "many signs in our culture that point in the direction opposite to (the critic's) conclusions." (The letter was in response to a column by David Carlin, "Face It, We've Lost: Catholics in an alien culture," in the May 17th issue.)

Msgr. Maniscalco notes, for example, that abortion-on-demand is still not generally accepted by a media-saturated populace, that opposition to physician-assisted suicide is broadly based, that support for family values is on the increase, and that resistance to same-sex marriages is strong (his letter appeared even before President Clinton announced that he would sign a bill permitting states not to recognize same-sex marriages allowed in other states).

And so the debate tips back and forth. One side looks at the cultural, political, social and legal containers, and sees them as half-full. Another side sees them as half-empty, and dropping fast.

This week's column does not propose to resolve the debate, nor could it do so even if it tried. Its purpose has been far more modest: to call attention to a few points often neglected in the discussion about religion and society.

One of those neglected points is what a friend and former colleague of mine

refers to as the Augustinian rule. It applies to those who seek to impose upon others a strict code of sexual morality which they themselves have not lived. A Southern congressman who has taken the lead in the fight against same-sex marriages and gay rights in order to protect the institution of marriage has himself been married three times.

Prominent divorced-and-remarried politicians, some of them candidates for the presidency, use "family values" as a battering ram against their opponents. Even the Vatican seems to have made appropriate adjustments in selecting a divorced-and-remarried layperson as its representative to a world conference.

The point here is not that the divorced and remarried are bad people, but only that those who presume to impose a strict moral code on others should observe it themselves.

And as for those same critics who think that religion also gets a raw deal in the courts, ask anyone who has ever brought a lawsuit against a religious organization. It immediately invokes the constitutional protection of the First Amendment, and in almost every instance the courts retreat. The judicial deck is stacked in favor of religion, not against it.

Complaints about an alien culture can begin to sound like whining.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

The greatest people simply imitate Jesus

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 10:37-42. (R1) 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16. (R2) Romans 6:3-4, 8-11.

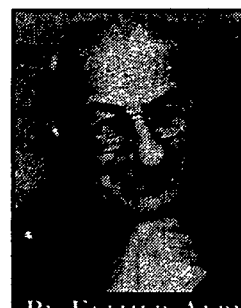
Baron de Rothschild, one of the richest men who ever lived, once posed dressed as a beggar for an artist. While the artist, Ary Scheffer, was painting him in rags and tatters holding a tin cup, a friend of the artist entered, and thinking the baron was really a beggar, dropped a coin into the cup.

Ten years later, the man who gave the coin received a letter containing a bank order for 10,000 francs and the message: "One day you gave a coin to a beggar in Ary Scheffer's studio. I invested it and today send you the capital. A good action always brings good fortune. Baron de Rothschild."

A simple act of kindness was bountifully rewarded. Jesus said a cup of cold water given to another in his name would be rewarded.

The heart of our faith is the spirit of giving. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked, "What is the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture?"

Her answer was not a clay pot or a fish hook or grinding stone, but "a healed femur." The femur is a bone in the leg. Mead explained no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle reigns. A healed femur showed that someone cared, that someone hunted for the in-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

jured person till the leg was healed. Such evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

Compassion is at the heart of our faith. How will they know that we are Christians? By our love. Christians live not by the law of the jungle, but by the law of love. Great Christians have always been great givers.

St. John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers in the church, devoted more time to charity than to his preaching to establishing charities, hospices and hospitals for the destitute. St. Bernard of Clairvaux founded a network of hostels, hospices and hospitals that survive today. St. Vincent de Paul founded the Sisters of Charity. Mother Teresa of Calcutta serves the poorest of the poor. They simply imitated Jesus, who was truly the man for others, the kindest person

who ever walked the earth, who taught us that the heart of faith is giving.

First of all, we can give to the needy. Sometimes, we forget how blessed we are and how needy some others may be. We are the recipients of grace. God loved us when we were helpless and undeserving. Ought we not look around for others who are helpless, and perhaps even undeserving, to pass on the love we have received?

The word "chapel" comes from the Latin word *capella*, which means "cloak." The word originated with the story of St. Martin, a Roman soldier giving his cloak to a beggar dying of cold. The cloak was later preserved as a relic and was kept in a building that took on the cloak's name.

A second form of giving is to the work of God.

Jesus taught that no gift given to the needy or to the church is ever given in vain. Some people are afraid to give their money, their time, their talent, their life to God because they think they will lose what they give. The very opposite is true: What you give, you keep. It is in giving that you receive.

You may have heard of George Boldt's castle. George was night clerk in a little third-class hotel in Philadelphia. One night he gave his own room to two tired elderly people.

The next morning one of the two

called him. He said, "I am John Jacob Astor. You're too fine a man for a hotel like this. I'll build you one in New York and make you the general manager."

So the Waldorf Astoria Hotel was built, and the night clerk became the best known hotel man in the world and a millionaire to boot. George built Boldt Castle for his wife. When you are kind to others, you are kind to yourself. That was what Jesus was saying in the Gospel.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 1

Amos 2:6-10, 13-16;
Matthew 8:18-22

Tuesday, July 2

Amos 3:1-8, 4:11-12, 36;
Matthew 8:23-27

Wednesday, July 3

Ephesians 2:19-22; John 20:24-29

Thursday, July 4

Amos 7:10-17; Matthew 9:1-8

Friday, July 5

Amos 8:4-6, 9-12; Matthew 9:9-13

Saturday, July 6

Amos 9:11-15; Matthew 9:14-17

**"IF YOU'VE MADE
A WILL, THERE'S ONE
MORE THING TO DO..."**

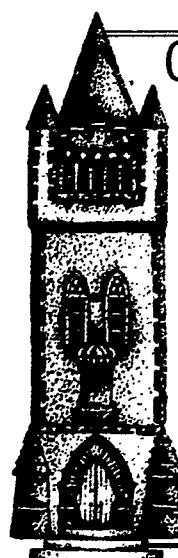
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