

COLUMNISTS

Telling Jesus' story explains our own

At least some of the attitudes and behaviors linked with "religious faith" are outcomes of superstition or irrational belief. Picking apart such "faith" has always been child's play for a trained scientist or logician.

In the 19th century the rationalist assault upon religion was launched with particular gusto. Members of the new intellectual class thought they had dethroned religion once and for all through the force of rational counter-arguments. But religion did not collapse.

In the 20th century the new Communist class thought that it could succeed where others had failed. For the Marxist, religion was simply a drug ("the opiate of the people") that could forcibly be taken away and its further use prevented by threat of punishment.

But religious faith was not crushed to death under the Communist jackboot. As soon as the Soviet empire had imploded, religion emerged from the bunkers, even if not in full vigor. Its churches and infrastructures were in greater need of rebuilding than its faith. It had remained alive all the while, underground.

Although ours is history's most scientifically and technologically advanced age, the religious impulse seems to have remained as strong as ever. Why is this so?

The cynic may say that superstitions die hard, and that we mortals have an insatiable appetite for the nonsensical.

A no less ideological explanation comes from certain religiously conserva-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

tive individuals who believe that religion has weakened all the onslaughts because it is based on well-established truth. Religion's arguments are right; science's and philosophy's are wrong.

Both sides — the secularist left and the religious right — rest their cases on the same mistaken assumption, namely, that religious faith is the outcome of a logical or empirically verifiable argument. Thus, if A is true and B is true, then C must be true. Conversely, if one can show that A or B is not true, then C cannot be true either.

What this cerebral approach to religion fails to see is the fundamentally non-cerebral, sacramental dimension of every authentic religious faith.

We do not believe in God because we can argue rationally to God's existence.

We do not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ because of objective evidence that even the skeptic cannot deny.

We do not believe in the Resurrection because of eyewitness accounts or the empty tomb.

We do not believe in eternal life because of arguments based on the immateriality of the soul.

This is not to say that our religious faith is irrational or arbitrary. The key distinction here is between the "rational" and the "reasonable."

The rational is what can be established by force of logic or empirical proof. Faith is not "rational" in that sense.

The "reasonable," on the other hand, is what is consistent with reason. Faith may not be provable by reason, but neither can it be disproved by reason. Why, then, do we believe?

Every religious faith answers two basic human needs: the need to find meaning in life, and the need to participate in a community of shared meaning.

Such meaning cannot be derived from rational argument alone. It is embodied in the very fabric of human experience itself. We look at reality and conclude that it is worthwhile and purposeful rather than "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Others, however, can look at the same reality and simply reserve judgment (agnosticism) or else reject utterly the possibility of a meaning beyond what can be seen, felt, measured, and tasted (atheism).

Neither "side" can prove its own case nor disprove the other's.

In the end, what carries the case for faith are not theological arguments, but rituals, symbols, stories and relationships. One doesn't become and remain a

Christian because one is convinced that the arguments for the truth of Christian faith are intellectually unassailable.

One becomes and remains a Christian because the story of Jesus Christ explains, purifies and multiplies our deepest human experiences — the joyful and the tragic alike, and everything else in between.

That story is told in various ways by parents and the wider Christian community in the home, in church, in school, and in the public forum generally: through word, example, rituals and symbols. This occurs particularly through the Eucharist, but also through the other sacraments and sacramentals; through paintings, music, statues, crucifixes and Nativity cribs; and through a caring and nurturing community that embodies in its own life the faith, hope and love that it ritualizes and proclaims.

A parish's faith-life, therefore, will more likely be renewed through an improved liturgy or social ministry than a new catechism or lecture series.

But like all things Catholic, both/and is better than either/or.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. St. Bernard's Institute is sponsoring a talk by Father McBrien in Strong Auditorium at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1100 S. Goodman St., Rochester, Friday, Oct. 18, 10 a.m. noon. St. Bernard's on the Road is sponsoring a talk by Father McBrien the previous evening, Oct. 17, 7:30-9:30, at Church of the Transfiguration, 50 W. Bloomfield Road, Pittsford.

Are we properly dressed?

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 22:1-14. (R1) Isaiah 25: 6-10. (R2) Philipians 4:12-14, 19-20.

A young business executive was tired of the dark, depressing clothes that he had been wearing each day to work. He told his wife that he needed a new look. Maybe something not so conservative. She was elated and went on a sartorial mission for her beloved husband.

The closet filled up with a stack of unfamiliar clothes. He pulled a sweater out of the pile on a day when he had to make a major presentation. They'll just have to get used to this new wilder and crazier version, he thought. That night he returned home wearing his new sweater, proudly reporting on the success of his presentation. His wife was stricken.

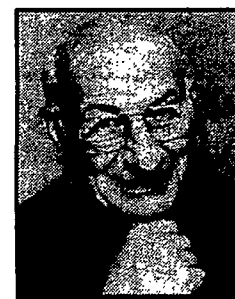
"You didn't wear that, did you?" she asked.

"Sure, why do you ask?"

She told him. It was their daughter's sweater, the kind that has a nice rolled collar and cuffs for that pleasingly feminine look! His daughters got a kick out of it. But Dad went back to tie and suit.

It's embarrassing, isn't it, to be dressed entirely wrong for a big event? None of us likes to look out of place. Appearances do matter.

In Sunday's parable of the Wedding Feast, we can appreciate the story about



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

the man who came to the wedding not properly dressed for the occasion. The father of the groom was a stickler for propriety. Even worse, he was a king, accustomed to having others cater to his whims. So the man not properly dressed was cast out into the outer darkness, into a place where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. Pretty rough treatment, wouldn't you say, for being improperly dressed?

But Jesus was trying to make a point. A parable is a story with one point. A parable is not an allegory. In an allegory every detail of the story stands for something else. There is the temptation to allegorize the parable. For instance, to make the father of the groom equal God. Then to draw the conclusion that God is a fierce and vindictive Being who will toss people into the fire of hell for the least transgression. In a

word, a God who is a petty tyrant.

But that was not the point of our Lord's parable. The point is that Christianity is not only a belief, it is also a lifestyle. A lifestyle of personal discipline and dignity, a lifestyle of time-honored values, a lifestyle that encompasses relationships with our neighbors, with the world in which we live and with our God.

Some people think it is enough just to believe, just to be a Catholic, to have faith without good works. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that "cheap grace." Grace is not cheap. Grace has been dearly purchased by Jesus Christ. It calls us to be dressed up with good works.

A small boy was consistently late coming home from school. His parents warned him one day that he must be home on time that afternoon, but he arrived later than ever. His mother met him at the door and said nothing. His father met him in the living room and said nothing.

At dinner that night, the boy looked at his plate. There was a slice of bread and a glass of water. His father's plate was full. He looked at his father, but his father remained silent. The boy was crushed. After the full impact hit the boy, the father quietly took the boy's plate and placed his own in front of him and smiled at his son. When that boy grew up, he said, "All my life I've known what God is like by what

my father did that night." Sin is serious business. God's grace is a costly gift.

So in the parable Jesus asks us to examine our lives to see if we are properly dressed for the wedding party. Do we have the right garments: garments such as a pure heart; garments such as a generous spirit; garments such as a life of faith, hope, and charity; garments such as obedience to the teachings of the church. If we do, we will not be speechless at the wedding feast nor cast into the darkness outside, for we will be properly dressed.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, October 14

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1; Luke 11:29-32

Tuesday, October 15

Galatians 5:1-6; Luke 11:37-41

Wednesday, October 16

Galatians 5:18-25, 7-14; Luke 11:42-46

Thursday, October 17

Ephesians 1:1-10; Luke 11:47-54

Friday, October 18

2 Timothy 4:10-17; Luke 10:1-9

Saturday, October 19

Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 12:8-12

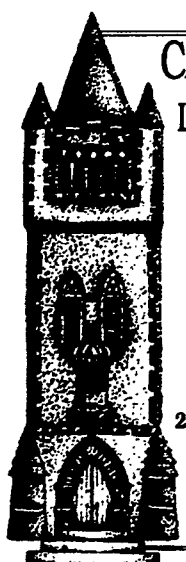
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