

COLUMNISTS

Excommunicating priest solved nothing

Father Tissa Balasuriya, a 72-year-old Sri Lankan theologian, was excommunicated from the Catholic Church earlier this month.

A priest for 44 years and a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate for 51 years, he is one of Asia's best known theologians, who has tried, like others in his situation, to make the Christian faith intelligible and attractive in a society that is overwhelmingly non-Christian.

Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) is an island off the southeast coast of India. Its total population is just under 18 million, of which only 6.7 percent are Catholic. Muslims constitute about 8 percent of the population, Hindus 15 percent, and Buddhists 69 percent.

These non-Christians have particular difficulty with Catholicism's traditional understanding of the doctrine of original sin, namely, that every individual is born in a state of alienation from God and that infants and children who die without baptism are excluded forever from Heaven.

In response to Father Balasuriya's efforts to articulate a more inclusive understanding of salvation for his fellow Asians, the Sri Lankan bishops charged that he misrepresented the doctrine of original sin (and other related doctrines).

In a country like Sri Lanka, where the population is almost 95 percent non-Christian and where the infant mortality rate is higher than in the First World, questions regarding the salvation of the



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

non-believer and the eternal destiny of the unbaptized are hardly speculative.

But what is one to say about the eternal destinies of so many millions of non-Christians and of so many millions of non-Christian infants and children who die before the age of discretion and moral autonomy?

The early Fathers of the church, St. Augustine chief among them, had a simple, though hardly comforting, answer. Since all these unfortunate individuals die in the state of original sin, that is, without the saving grace of Christ, and since grace is an absolutely necessary condition for entrance into Heaven, all of them are condemned to Hell.

That harsh, but superficially logical, doctrine prevailed for several centuries, until some medieval theologians — for whom questions about life after death were almost an obsession — took hold of the issue and employed their remarkable penchant for creating new theological categories.

The medievalists invented Limbo as an eternal state of natural happiness, reserved by a merciful God for those who die with original sin still on their souls, but without ever having committed any personal sins deserving of eternal punishment.

Belief in Limbo, and the dissemination of the belief through preaching, catechesis and spiritual counseling (especially of bereaved mothers of unbaptized babies, infants, and young children), remained a well-known feature of Catholic life until the Second Vatican Council.

Keep in mind, please, that the nearly universal belief in Limbo was in our doctrinal luggage when we checked into the council in October 1962. But by the time the council ended in December 1965, Limbo had disappeared from our baggage. What happened to it?

The century's greatest Catholic theologian, the late Jesuit Karl Rahner, suggested that Limbo was given a "tacit burial" by the council when it broadened the church's traditional understanding of salvation, and particularly the salvation of nonbelievers.

Far more significant than Rahner's opinion, however, is the absence of any mention whatever of Limbo in the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, authorized by Pope John Paul II himself and composed under the direction of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Regarding the eternal destiny of chil-

dren who die without baptism, the Catechism merely says that "the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God" (n. 1261).

What does that mean? Father Balasuriya, Karl Rahner and a growing number of other Catholic theologians, especially in the Third World, have been trying to answer that question.

They are coming increasingly to the view that both St. Augustine and the medieval theologians were simply wrong, that unbaptized children are neither condemned to Hell nor dispatched to a fictitious place called Limbo. They go to Heaven, because that's what the "mercy of God" would dictate.

And if they go to Heaven, it must be because they are born, after all, in the state of grace, which is an absolutely necessary condition for entrance into Heaven.

Original sin is still a reality, to be sure, but it has to be understood and explained in a different way. And so, too, does the relationship between baptism and salvation.

Excommunicating those who try to solve these problems — especially a 72-year-old Third World priest of color — is no solution. In fact, it only creates a new problem of trying to explain why the church seems to act so much less mercifully than the God it claims to worship and serve.

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

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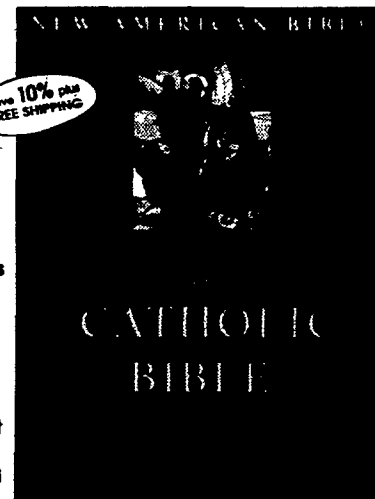
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