

COLUMNISTS

Catholics not as polarized as it seems

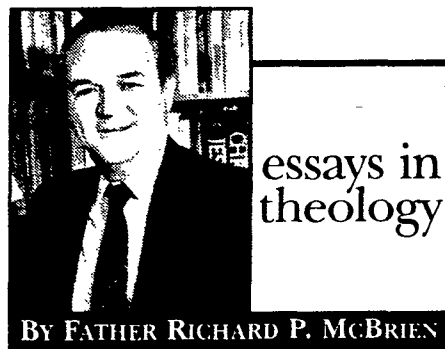
Father Andrew Greeley, a distinguished sociologist, has written an important article for *America* magazine entitled, "Polarized Catholics? Don't Believe Your Mail!" (2/22/97). I liked it for the obvious reason that it provides social scientific support for a position taken in a column I wrote in late November, in which I suggested that what the Catholic Church at the parish level needs today is not "common ground" but "common sense."

On the basis of my own knowledge of the pastoral scene in the United States, I pointed out that active Catholic parishioners are not sharply divided between left and right, nor are they caught in a cross-fire over issues that are hotly debated in the pages of various Catholic publications and within the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Their only priority is having the experience of a healthy parish, with a healthy parish leadership and sensible, well-planned liturgies presided over by a psychologically healthy and pastorally competent priest.

For them, a good parish provides not only a healthy environment for worship, but for all of the other sacramental and ministerial activities of their parish. That includes a solid, well-organized religious education program with healthy teachers who have no idiosyncratic religious ideas that disturb rather than enrich their students.

When their sons and daughters are



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

ready for marriage, ordinary Catholic parents expect them to be treated with sensitivity and respect, especially if it happens to be an ecumenical or interfaith marriage.

And when their own parents are sick or dying, or when a tragedy hits, they welcome the pastoral support and spiritual consolation of a priest who knows what human sorrow is all about and who can sympathize without being preachy or pietistic.

The so-called middle Catholic would also like the dedicated women and men who serve them and their families in their parishes to be able to get on with their work without being attacked by ill-informed, and often mean-spirited, Catholics (almost always on the right) who think they know more about the real meaning of Catholicism than 95 percent of active Catholics do.

Are ordinary Catholic parishioners polarized? On the basis of scientific da-

ta, Father Greeley argues that they are not — at least not so much as many have assumed. On issues of sexual morality, the role of women, divorce and especially abortion, he notes, "there is even less evidence of polarization among Catholics than there is in the rest of American society."

Insofar as there has been a change in the thinking of Catholics between 1972 and 1994, the change on five of six key issues has been in a more "liberal" direction: abortion, sexual morality, divorce laws, premarital sex, family gender roles, and public roles of women. "Only on the issue of divorce laws," Father Greeley observes, "has there been no change over time in average Catholic attitudes."

The point of his article, however, is not to report such changes in Catholic attitudes (that's been done often), but to ask whether these changes have led to polarization. In other words, are Catholics now more likely to be clustered at opposite ends of the continuum than they used to be?

What the data show is that this is not the case and, in fact, that polarization among Catholics has actually decreased in recent years.

"With a drift to the left and no increase in polarization," he writes, "it follows mathematically that the 'right wing' segment of the Catholic population is declining ... no matter how loudly it shouts." He estimates the proportion of

"hard-right" Catholics today at less than 2 percent, if one also takes into account the opinions of Catholics on such issues of married priests, the popular election of bishops, and the decentralization of power away from the Vatican to the local churches.

Why, then, do so many people still have the impression that there is greater polarization in the Catholic Church than there actually is?

Father Greeley notes, among other things, that those on the extremes write the most letters to bishops and the press; the media showcase the extremes because they make better copy; and the hard-right's "considerable influence" in the current pontificate exaggerates their importance far beyond their "minute" numerical strength.

One thing that does continue to increase is the alienation of rank-and-file Catholics from the hierarchy. "The laity as a body," Father Greeley points out, "are less likely to take seriously what the pope or the bishops say."

He insists that he is not advocating these conclusions, only reporting them. They are "not a matter of personal opinion, but of statistical fact."

Facts that challenge tightly-held prejudices, however, are usually ignored or vigorously denied. That will be the case here, too, no doubt.

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

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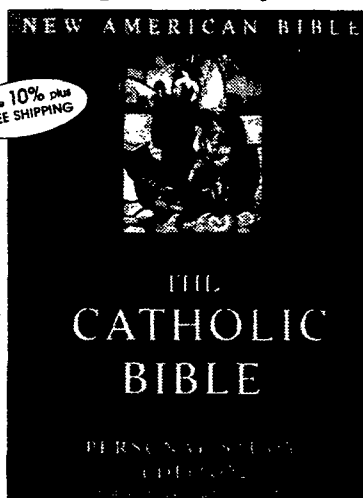
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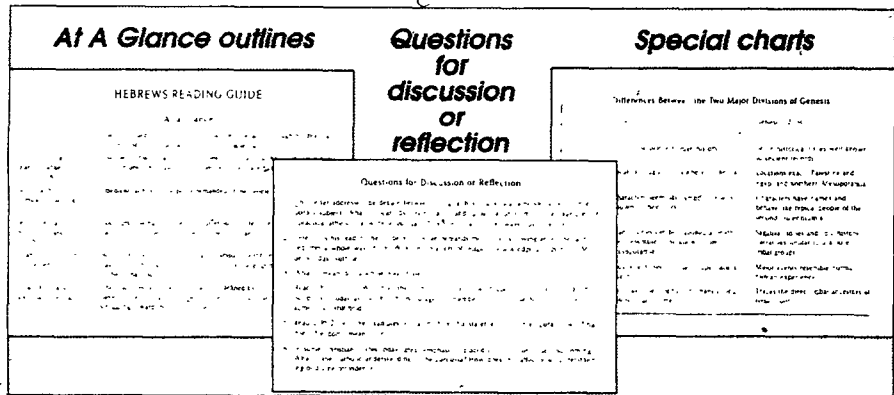
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