

COLUMNISTS

Cult sounds all too familiar

By now the mass suicide of the 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult in California has been examined over and over again. Could there be anything more to say about it?

The marks of the Heaven's Gate group were similar to other cult groups. They tended to recruit people who feel rudderless, unfulfilled, and unhappy with the world and with the hand they've been dealt in it.

They offered them a privileged path to "salvation" and the security, in the meantime, of a tightly organized community life where there are no choices about the time of rising, meals, work, leisure activities, or going to bed at night.

To maintain the coherence of such a group, it is necessary to have authoritarian leaders to whom absolute and unquestioning obedience is given. Individuality is totally suppressed.

Thus, all wear the same hairstyles and the same shapeless clothes to insure the negation of human sexuality and gender differences. Ties to family and friends outside the community are strictly forbidden.

As some of us take our critical measure of the Heaven's Gate group and of others like them, we should proceed with caution and not a little humility. After all, we had our own versions of Heaven's Gate in the pre-Vatican II church.

Women religious at one time were required to deny their feminine sexuality by the shaving of their heads and the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

donning of ample habits that covered and concealed the natural curvatures of the body. They renounced their baptismal name for a new one (just as the Heaven's Gate group took new names, some as silly as Bo and Peep), and many were given male names.

Every minute of the day was carefully regulated. Silence was enforced, even at meals, not just to encourage prayerful contemplation, but to inhibit social interaction. Contact with the "outside world" was also meticulously controlled, and friendships outside the community were discouraged. Although bonds with families were not totally severed, as with Heaven's Gate, home visitation was out of the question. Brief visits from family were allowed, but rarely.

Upon a parent's death, many religious women were forced to choose between attending the wake or the funeral but not both. And they were discouraged from grieving openly.

Male religious communities in the pre-Vatican II church were no less rigid or isolated, even if they enjoyed a greater measure of freedom than their women counterparts.

But the men, diocesan and religious alike, also concealed their sexuality under long, flowing habits and cassocks. Prolonged periods of silence similarly inhibited social interaction. Friendships outside the clerical circle were discouraged (friendships with women were simply unthinkable), and contact with one's family were limited more in the case of male religious than of diocesan seminarians.

Unlike today, there was a severe stigma in leaving the group, and the fear of that stigma (a "spoiled priest" in the case of an Irish seminarian who quit before ordination, or a "shepherd in the mist," in the case of a man who left the priesthood itself) functioned as a strong deterrent.

This is not to say that members of religious orders before Vatican II are to be equated with cultists. Religious of that period were and still are people of deep faith and of profound, even heroic ministerial commitment to the poor and the sick.

We are fortunate that much of this is ancient history for the mainline religious orders, male and female alike, and for diocesan seminarians. The habits and cassocks are, for the most part, gone, and so is the enforced isolation from the world

outside, from family and friends, and from those of the opposite sex.

Some conservative Catholics complain about the changes; others are simply nostalgic for the "good old days." But most Catholics recognize the changes for what they are: a leap forward from unhealthiness to healthiness (keeping in mind that the Latin word for salvation is "salus," which means "health").

But have we completely evacuated the Heaven's Gate syndrome from the inner life of the Catholic Church? Unfortunately not.

Some of the new religious orders and movements, much favored by the Vatican, are throwbacks to the pre-Vatican II order, emphasizing the worst of it rather than the best.

Their leadership structure is just as authoritarian as the Heaven's Gate types. Their denial of human sexuality (suggested in the restoration of the old-fashioned habits and cassocks) is just as pronounced. So is their rejection of the goodness of the human body (reflected in the practice of self flagellation). And they, too, enforce isolation from family and friends, and apply enormous pressures against leaving the group.

They are traveling away from, rather than toward, the fullness of health promised in the Gospel.

...
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Rules for reverence allow variations

Q. A member of our parish tells us he has it on good authority that when Communion is received standing, liturgical law requires that one genuflect before receiving.

That's news to me. I've only seen it done two or three times, but I said I would find out. Is that now a rule for going to Communion?

A. I don't know who his authority was supposed to be, but there is no such requirement.

The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* says only that communicants should "make a suitable reverence" before responding "amen" to the words "the body of Christ." It has the same notation twice (Sections 244 and 245).

This reverence might be a genuflection, of course, but it could also be several other actions, such as a bow.

The point has been made, very fittingly I believe, that the most expressive act of reverence before Communion is



question corner

BY FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

the one the vast majority of people already use, holding out their hands.

Outstretched hands are a powerful symbol, for most of the human race, of nearly all those things we want to say to God as we come to receive the body of Christ.

Whether it's a child standing before his parents, a starving mother in Rwanda or ourselves before the eucharistic Lord, open hands held out to someone

express our desire and need for what that person has to give.

The open hands also proclaim other feelings in our hearts at that time: our hunger and reverence for the gift we ask, our trust that the giver will give it, humility in acknowledging total dependence on what we will receive, praise and thanks for the generosity of the one who offers the gift and much more.

As a priest, I admit to being deeply moved by this eloquent gesture every time I give Communion.

It's hard to imagine any other action capable of carrying such a weight of spiritual meaning for approaching Communion. As a bonus it is also unobtrusive and does not call attention to oneself.

Some may object that this sounds fine, but how many think of all this every time they receive the Eucharist?

It's true, of course, that we need to be always more conscious of why we do what we do. But one might make that

same objection about a kiss or hug. What husband and wife reflect consciously on the deep meanings of these actions every time they say hello or goodbye?

Whether they do or not, however, the meaning remains and inevitably achieves its effect when such acts are done in a context of love and devotion.

It's the same with open hands extended in prayer and hope. This nearly universal gesture in its own way accomplishes what it symbolizes: humbleness and hunger.

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A free brochure on ecumenism, including questions on inter-Communion and other ways of sharing worship with people of other faiths, is available by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to Father John Dietzen, Holy Trinity Parish, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, Ill. 61701.

Questions may be sent to Father Dietzen at the same address.

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Volunteers must be healthy, post-menopausal women between the ages of 40 and 65. After a physical examination, women will be randomized to one of 8 treatment groups and receive various combinations of an FDA-approved estrogen and/or progestin, or placebo.

During this one-year study, volunteers are seen every three months. Benefits to volunteers include free Pap smears and lab tests, free mammogram, and possible relief of menopausal symptoms based on the medication(s) they receive. Compensation of \$450 is available. Women who have had a hysterectomy are not eligible.

Women interested in participating can call Wanda Rivers at 275-7891.