

COLUMNISTS

Dissidents aren't so dishonorable

The word "dissident" has taken on a negative meaning in certain Catholic circles, as if it were synonymous with disloyal, treasonous, or heretical. The dictionary, however, defines the word in a neutral way, namely, as one who disagrees with an opinion or a belief.

Is mere disagreement with opinions and beliefs in the church something always to be reviled and castigated, especially if the disagreement is expressed toward an opinion or a belief of those in pastoral authority?

If someone really wanted to push that view, there are 20 centuries of church history to refute it. There have been from the beginning — when Paul "opposed (Peter) to his face because he clearly was wrong" (Galatians 2:11) — thousands of instances where lay Catholics disagreed with clergy, laity and clergy with bishops, bishops among themselves, and laity, religious and bishops with the pope.

Just like any community or family, the church is composed of fallible human beings who don't always see things in the same way. That shouldn't surprise, much less disturb, anyone with an ounce of common sense.

But there is also an honorable meaning to the word "dissident." Václav Havel, the current president of the Czech Republic, is only one of many, many cases in point. He suffered imprisonment under the Communists because of his public



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

"disagreements" with official policies, only to emerge as the first head of state in the new Czech Republic.

A less celebrated case surfaced in late February of this year with the death of Miladin Zivotic in Sarajevo.

The obituary in *The New York Times* (March 6) described him in its opening paragraph as "a leading dissident during the Communist era in Yugoslavia and one of the most prominent domestic critics of Serbian involvement in the Balkan wars."

Zivotic had been the leader of a small group of intellectuals and artists known as the Belgrade Circle, which condemned the Serbian role in the recent wars in Bosnia and Croatia. The Belgrade Circle, which had included among its ranks the late Milovan Djilas, one of the greatest dissident heroes of that troubled land, tried to create a common front of Serbs, Muslims and Croats in opposition to nationalist movements in the Balkans.

Not surprisingly, the group was regularly denounced by the authorities as a tool of Serbia's enemies, just as dissidents in any community or institution are always branded as instruments of its enemies.

Zivotic was an outspoken critic of the way Serbia treated non-Serbs within its borders, particularly the two millions Albanians in the Kosovo region. When Serbian nationalists began to threaten Muslims in the Sarjak region early in the war, he went to live with Muslim families.

Despite Miladin Zivotic's stature, he was ignored by the official Serbian press and was generally marginalized, even by those who opposed the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. Their opposition to Milosevic was not for starting and supporting the war, but for selling out Serbian interests in Bosnia.

Zivotic, on the other hand, argued that Serbian society could only renew itself by accepting blame for the Balkan wars and by ridding itself of its racist nationalism.

"The first act any new president of this country must do," he said just before his death, "is travel to Sarajevo and beg for forgiveness, just as Willy Brandt (former West German chancellor) did when he traveled to Warsaw. This is the only way we can begin to heal ourselves."

Miladin Zivotic first came to prominence in 1968 when he was dismissed from the philosophy faculty of Belgrade University for supporting student protests

against the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. He thereupon started the Free Belgrade University, which met secretly in homes and whose classes were frequently raided by the police.

Soon after his restoration to the faculty nearly 20 years later, in 1987, Zivotic found himself ostracized by students and colleagues alike for his condemnation of Serbian nationalism and of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which he called "the cradle of Serb nationalism and an enemy of modernity." He took early retirement in 1994.

Upon his death over two months ago, Miladin Zivotic was eulogized by the editor of the *Belgrade Circle* journal as a man who had been "rejected all his life," who "lived on the margins," but who never gave up his ideals or his values. "He believed passionately in the common humanity of all people and endured great hardship and loneliness in his battle for human decency."

Had Miladin Zivotic been a Catholic priest, rather than a lay Serbian Orthodox philosopher, he would never have been appointed a bishop. And had he been a Catholic theologian, he would have been written off as "a dissident."

He would have been honored by the epithet.

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Catholic Courier

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