

COLUMNISTS

Little-known theologian left impact

Catherine Mowry LaCugna was my friend and colleague at the University of Notre Dame. She died on May 3 after a long and courageous struggle against cancer. She was only 44.

Catherine and I frequently joked about our first meeting at a crowded and noisy hotel in New Haven, Conn., back in the spring of 1981. She had recently completed her doctorate at Fordham University and was still living in New York. I was visiting at my mother's home in West Hartford. We agreed on New Haven for the interview.

I had been appointed the previous year to chair the department of theology at Notre Dame and was just beginning the process of rebuilding. I was impressed with Catherine LaCugna that first day and invited her to come to Indiana for a more formal process. She did very well and we made the appointment.

Catherine began as an assistant professor in the fall of 1981 and moved quickly through the academic ranks, receiving last year an endowed professorial chair.

In the course of her career at Notre Dame she won two prestigious teaching awards and published an important book on the Trinity entitled, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (Harper-Collins, 1991).

Although she never became a public theologian — one frequently quoted in the press or appearing on national tele-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

vision — her work had a significant impact within the Catholic theological community and among many of her graduate students.

I had once assured Catherine that she would never have to worry about becoming a controversial figure like me. Specializing in the doctrine of the Trinity would evoke more yawns than rebukes from the magisterial establishment.

But like many so-called speculative theologians (the late Father Bernard Lonergan, SJ, and David Tracy at the University of Chicago also come to mind), Catherine's work was radically critical of several conventional assumptions about the Christian faith and their embodiment in the structures of the church.

Perhaps Catherine LaCugna's principal contribution to theology was her successful effort, in concert with other theologians, to reinstate the doctrine of the

Trinity at the center of Christian faith.

For nearly 1500 years, following the major dogmatic definitions of the fourth and fifth centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity was parked inconspicuously on the sidelines of Christian theology and practice.

For many ordinary Christians, the doctrine made no sense at all; three divine persons, but only one God. It was something you simply believed "on faith," but it had no discernible importance in one's life.

Indeed, I can recall a seminary professor of mine (long since deceased) urging us never to preach on the Trinity, except perhaps on Trinity Sunday. The assumption was that the doctrine had no practical meaning, and couldn't be explained anyway.

Inspired by the greatest Catholic theologian of this century, Father Karl Rahner, SJ, Catherine LaCugna helped to retrieve the doctrine of the Trinity as the most "fruitful and intelligible way to articulate what it means to be 'saved by God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit'" (from her article on the Trinity in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. II, Fortress Press, 1991).

"The doctrine of the Trinity," she wrote, "is a summary statement of faith in the God of Jesus Christ. ... The heart of Christian life is the encounter with a personal God who makes possible both our union with God and communion

with each other. The Spirit of God gathers us together into the body of Christ, incorporating us into a new relationship with each other."

For Catherine LaCugna there could be no artificial distinction between the inner life of God where the three divine persons dwell in inaccessible mystery, and the life of God in the world. On the contrary, the "God who is" is "God for us."

We can only know God as "God for us," that is, as the God who creates and sustains all that is, as the God who came among us in the flesh and redeemed us by the cross and the resurrection, and as the God who remains with us as the source of new life and of communion.

It is the "God for us" whom we encounter in the liturgical life of the church, in our spiritual lives, in our relations with one another, and in the life of society itself.

The doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, is not simply a strange and mysterious truth of faith that we believe on the authority of the church, but it is at the heart and center of our Christian faith and practice.

Catherine Mowry LaCugna takes her well-earned place now in that eternal communion with the triune God toward which we all aspire and in which we all hope.

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

How to deal with dandelions

The long cool spring is great for dandelions. Their flower heads become enormous, their roots grow deep and their seeds float onto our lawns on June winds. To the eye educated by golf course putting greens, dandelions give a ragged look to the landscape. They are ugly and we want to dig them out.

But dandelions are a great diagnostic tool. They only flourish in acidic soil. If they are absent, it's not so much by virtue of vigilance in rooting them out as by the TLC the gardener has lavished on the dirt. The remedy is to apply lime or to grow hydrangeas, azaleas, potatoes and rhubarb, which all do well in sour soil. A cultivated dandelion in a garden bed also protects tomato roots from fusarium by tying up the soil-bound iron the tomato virus needs.

The "lion's tooth" has other benefits. It is a great joy to young children in both flower and seed cluster, their first flower,



ordinary time

By MARY ANN MCGIVERN, S.I.

a free toy to blow away, always more to pluck. When we grew up, the culture changed the way we look at this small creation and we forgot this simple pleasure of our youth.

The dandelion is pretty terrific. All of its parts can be eaten. The young leaves, gathered before the flower forms, are tenderest and least bitter. Cultivated dandelions are also tastier. But even the

weediest can be tossed in salad or boiled like spinach any time. Try peeling the roots and adding them raw to that salad or throw them on the grill or in the fry pan. Munch on the yellow blossoms as you pick them, deep-fry them, mix them into pancake batter, or make wine. Dry the leaves for tea. Dry and grind the roots, like chicory, for ersatz coffee.

A half a cup of uncooked dandelion leaves contains 280 percent of the adult daily requirement of beta carotene, half the vitamin C, plus magnesium, calcium, iron and potassium. This so-called weed is reputed to improve the liver function, lower cholesterol and blood pressure, and stimulate urine production — whereby its French name "pissenlit." The dandelion is also an alternative source of rubber, has chewing gum potential and is a celebrated wart remover.

Alas, when all is said and done, I forget to run out and pick a dandelion when

I'm making salad or pancakes, and the greens are too bitter for my taste. I don't have warts or chew gum or need an alternative source of rubber. But six children under 4 who live in my apartment building all love dandelions. And all my knowledge makes me marvel all the more at God's bounty and at human resourcefulness. I want to taste the flowers as well as smell them.

God is in the details of our lives (in the dandelion's beta carotene) as well as in the mountain vistas. This least of flowers, scorned and rejected, has the power to lift our hearts and minds to God as well as heal and feed us. Contemplate the dandelion this summer and rejoice in it — even while you're rooting it out of the lawn.

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Sister McGivern is the executive director of the St. Louis Economic Conversion Project based in St. Louis, Mo.

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