

COLUMNISTS

'Others' behave so immorally

I read a passage recently that struck a familiar chord. The passage was in a review of a book called *Down by the River* by Edna O'Brien. As quoted in the review by Hilary Mantel it reads:

"I work my butt off, seven days a week, I work overtime to buy shoes for my kids ... I grow my own vegetables ... I don't permit myself a drink, I don't go to the dogs, I don't go to the bookmakers, while he and his ilk sponge off the nation, beget children ... Holy Christ, I'd send the lot of them down the mine and dynamite it."

The reviewer states that O'Brien "captures all the scorn and rage of people who believe they have never put a foot wrong."

What strikes me about the passage and Mantel's comment is how accurately they reflect comments I hear more and more. I suppose the experience behind them is part of a struggle that has been with the church from its very beginning: How can we be both a community of the redeemed, and still sinners? Churches are supposed to be made up of grace-filled, virtuous



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

folks on fire with the love of God and rid of all vices common to the "unredeemed."

But alas when we look around at those in the pews with us on Sunday, we actually see a lot of vice — especially in the lives of others! This experience seems intensified by a tendency that seems to be on the rise: There are a whole lot of unworthy individuals out there trying to usurp our goods and compromise our goodness

This scenario can seem to follow these lines: "We" are the good guys and gals, deserving any and all good that comes our

way. "They" are sinners morally or free-loaders economically, detracting from "our" decency, living off "our" earnings.

I think I should confess right here that I unfortunately identify sometimes with the very attitudes I'm attempting to criticize. I most often judge things with my own advantage in mind. So I pretty much assume that I've done things quite well. If other people get themselves into unfortunate plights, they haven't managed to be as hardworking, clever or "noble" as I am.

What I particularly like about the passage quoted at the beginning is how its final sentence reveals so clearly the effects of the self-righteousness of the "virtuous"; and how much "meaner" and more destructive of community the sins of the righteous are than the vices of the "unworthy."

The Gospels are great fun on this topic, and so revealing of these paradoxical sides of human nature. They constantly portray Jesus as substituting frustrating standards of judgment for ones with which we (and those like us) are so comfortable,

and which let us end up in the winner's circle. He says things like: "The least among you will be the greatest," "I have come not for the righteous but for sinners," "Judge not, that you will not be judged."

I heard this quip once: "The successful and the virtuous are often those who were born on third base, but think they've hit a triple." I often remind myself of the wisdom behind that bit of Americana. Even what's good about me, I've received — including my better attitudes, skills and virtues.

Trying to be honest about the shortcomings in our own relationship with God is much more difficult than dwelling on others' failings. Working to form a society whose benefits extend to everyone is much more difficult than drawing dividing lines to separate the worthy from the unworthy.

A loving, merciful attitude toward everyone is much more Christlike than a stingy, miserly condemnation of "sinners."

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

In response to Father McBrien

In November 1996, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops discussed the implementation of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," the 1990 apostolic constitution on higher education. And the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked Father Richard McBrien.

"Bishops should be welcome on a Catholic university campus," Father McBrien replied. "Give them tickets to ball games. Let them say Mass. Bring them to graduation. Let them sit on the stage. But there should be nothing beyond that. They should have nothing to say about the internal academic affairs of the university or any faculty member thereof."

A striking response. But bracket, for a moment, the fact that Father McBrien has devoted oceans of ink to the imperative of strengthening the power of local bishops against the alleged encroachments of the papacy and the curia. And try to forget that virtually every despot in the 20th century has claimed that his "internal affairs" were his own business. What remains is a singularly un-ecclesial statement about Catholic intellectual life.

Father McBrien swears that he and his theological colleagues are not, heaven forbid, beyond criticism. "But I want the criticism to come from people with the credentials to criticize." In the tradition of the



the catholic difference

BY GEORGE WEIGEL

church, the office of bishop included supervision of "the transmission of the faith received from the apostles." (See Richard P. McBrien, "Bishop," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. Richard P. McBrien, general editor.)

In the Catholic intellectual world according to Father McBrien, however, that supervisory function stops at the campus gate. Why? "Because the idea of ... suggesting any kind of oversight by nonacademic people in the academic operations of a university ... is odious to anybody in an academic institution."

Among characteristics of the "denominational temptation" is the tendency to displace an ecclesial way of thinking (*sentire cum ecclesia*, "thinking with the church," we called it) with habits of thought derived

from American elite cultural opinion.

Father McBrien's variant on Marie Antoinette — "Let 'em watch football" — in the matter of bishops and the teaching of the Catholic faith in Catholic universities is the antithesis of *sentire cum ecclesia*. Indeed, that the local bishop should have "nothing to say" about the teaching of "any faculty member" at a Catholic university is a perfect example of denominational temptation at work.

Academic freedom, defined legalistically by the American Association of University Professors, trumps the teaching authority of the church vis-a-vis Catholic colleges, defined theologically and juridically by an apostolic constitution issued by the Bishop of Rome.

One might have thought that the travail of thoroughly denominationalized divinity schools across the country would have given pause to Catholic theologians today. For, cut loose from an authoritative ecclesial tradition, mainline Protestant and ecumenical theologians have proven just as vulnerable to the lunacies of political correctness and deconstructionism as university English and history departments.

Surely Father McBrien does not propose that the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., which features an offi-

cially sanctioned "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Caucus," enjoys a superior relationship to the church and to the pursuit of truth than does a Catholic university sweating under the supposed rigors of "Ex Corde Ecclesiae"?

In his new book, *Inside the Vatican*, Jesuit Father Thomas Reese argues that "the relationship between theologians and the papacy is worse today than at any time since the Reformation." This would, I suspect, come as news to theologians who thought the definition of infallibility at Vatican I inopportune; to Loisy, Tyrrell and other Catholic Modernists; to deLubac, Congar and the other targets of the 1950 encyclical, "Humani Generis," or to John Courtney Murray during his enforced silence on matters of church and state.

But however odd a historical judgment, Father Reese's assertion nicely captures the fevers of today's theological guild, in which *sentire cum ecclesia* is assumed to require the abandonment of critical thought. Which means that Catholic intellectuals have internalized the indictment laid against the church by every anti-Catholic bigot since the Enlightenment.

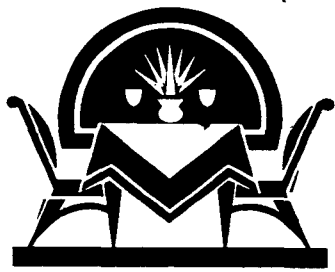
Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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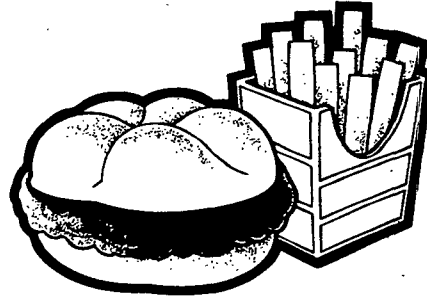
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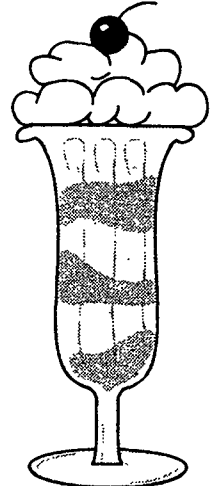
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