

## Sharing Communion heightens tension

Two controversies have erupted in recent months over the reception of holy Communion by two presidents. The new president of the Republic of Ireland, Mary McAleese, received Communion at an Anglican liturgy in Dublin in December, and the president of the United States, Bill Clinton, received Communion, along with his wife Hillary, at a Roman Catholic liturgy in South Africa in late March. Both events energized the keepers of orthodoxy.

Desmond Connell, the archbishop of Dublin, condemned the Irish president's action in exceedingly harsh terms. It is "a sham," he said, for any Catholic to take "sham sacraments" from the hands of a non-Catholic. Subsequently, the standing committee of the Irish bishops' conference sent a warning to President McAleese that they would have to reprimand her if she repeated the action.

Denis Faul, the bishop of Dungannon, insisted that no Catholic has the right to take Communion in another church and that this rule applies "to the pope in Rome and Mary McAleese as much as it does to Paddy and Biddy Murphy."

There were, to be sure, more moderate reactions to the Irish president's action. Bishop William Walsh of Killaloe told the press that he would not dream of standing in judgment of President McAleese or any other Catholic who received Communion in another church, if they did so in good conscience.

At an ecumenical service the follow-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ing month, Cardinal Cahal Daly, archbishop of Armagh and Catholic primate of all Ireland, also took a conciliatory line, expressing the hope that these "delicate and sensitive matters" would be discussed between the Irish churches "at some appropriate forum" in the future.

A telephone poll conducted by three of Ireland's Sunday newspapers disclosed a high level of support for the President. The *Sunday Independent* found that 78 percent believed that McAleese was right to take Communion in the Anglican service, and a telephone survey of priests, conducted by the *Sunday Tribune*, revealed that 53 percent of the clergy supported the president, while 42 percent did not.

The Anglican archbishop of Dublin and primate of all Ireland, Walter Empey, responded with much restraint to the insulting remarks of his Roman Catholic counterpart, Desmond Connell.

"It ill behooves Christians to be squab-

bling over what is a profound and wonderful mystery," he said. "The church of Ireland is confident ... in its understanding and discipline concerning the holy Eucharist. It would be impertinent for us to comment on what is essentially a problem for another Christian church."

A similar controversy, in reverse, erupted more recently in the United States when President Clinton, a Southern Baptist, received Communion at a Catholic Mass in South Africa in March. He was explicitly invited to do so by the parish priest, in keeping with the priest's understanding of a recent ecumenical directive from the Catholic bishops of South Africa.

The directive states that when non-Catholic Christians attend a Eucharist for "a special feast or event," sharing holy Communion "may be both meaningful and desirable, expressing the degree of unity that the participating Christians already have with one another."

Nevertheless, a prominent American bishop, Cardinal John J. O'Connor, archbishop of New York, was quick to criticize the president's action. In the course of a Palm Sunday homily in St. Patrick's Cathedral, he characterized it as "legally and doctrinally wrong in the eyes of the church law and church doctrine."

The cardinal said that his decision to speak publicly on the matter was prompted by a concern that many people were "confused" by the president's

reception of Communion, and he wanted especially to dispel the false impression that "if one has enough prestige or money, anything goes."

(In June 1983, a month after Cardinal O'Connor was appointed bishop of Scranton, President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy, both non-Catholics, received Communion at a memorial Mass for a longtime aide. There is no record of any protest from Bishop O'Connor, or from any other American bishop.)

The critics of the Irish and U.S. presidents are, of course, technically correct. The official rules of the Catholic Church forbid the reception of holy Communion by members of separated churches, except when, in the judgment of the local bishop, "a grave necessity arises" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1401).

However, the pastoral reality is dramatically different. Every Sunday of the year intercommunion widely occurs with the full knowledge and acquiescence of parish priests. And the eucharistic pathway runs in both directions.

Undoubtedly, more will be said about this issue in the future, but one prays that no utterance will descend to the depths to which Archbishop Desmond Connell took us with his ugly (and theologically incorrect) remark about the "sham sacraments" of the separated churches.

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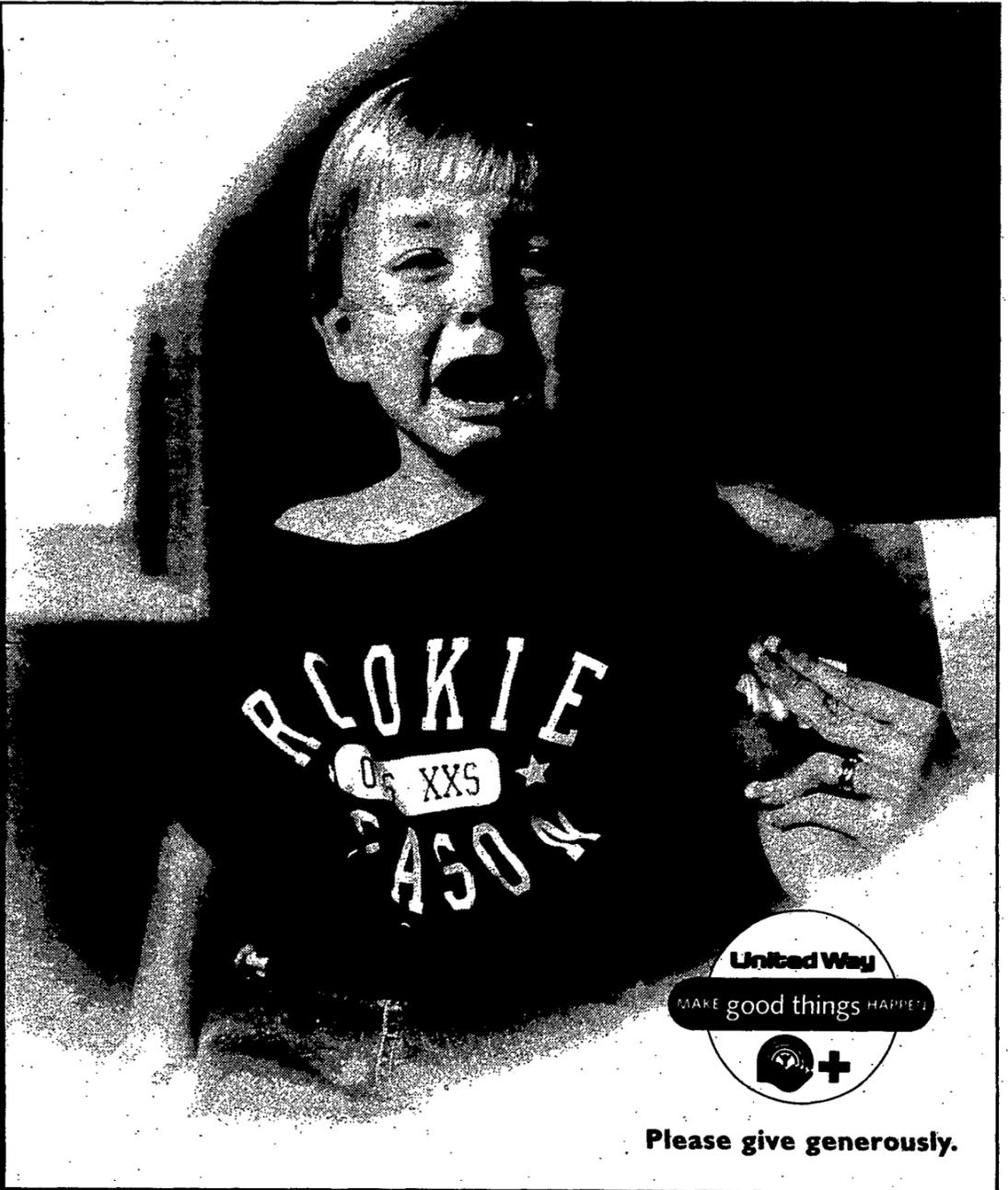
Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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