

Heresy hunting always in season

The word "heresy" is often used improperly, at times recklessly. Some are quick to label as heretical any religious view at variance with their own.

Heresy is a technical theological term. It is the denial of a dogma of the church. A dogma, in turn, is a doctrine that has been infallibly taught, usually by an ecumenical council or by a pope acting as earthly head of the church. (I leave aside here the debatable concept of the ordinary universal magisterium, which applies to teachings that have never been formally defined but that are claimed to have been held and taught by the hierarchical magisterium over a long time.)

Two distinctions are in order here. Heresy can be material or formal. Material heresy is the denial of a dogma without the person's being aware of any conflict with an infallible teaching of the church. Formal heresy, on the other hand, involves a knowing and deliberate denial of a dogma.

Many Catholics, even the most zealous of heresy-hunters, fall into material heresy from time to time. If such Catholics were asked to explain in some theological detail their understanding of the Trinity, for example, a number of the explanations would be tantamount to tritheism, or belief in three gods.



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

The second distinction is between dogma and doctrine. Many Catholics who seem obsessed with the dangers of heresy usually confuse the two. Every dogma is a doctrine, i.e., an official teaching of the church, but not every doctrine is a dogma, i.e., an infallibly defined doctrine binding on the whole church as a matter of faith.

A Catholic's rejection of the papal teaching on birth control, for example, is not heretical in any sense, because the teaching was not infallible. On the other hand, a denial of the Council of Trent's teaching that Christ is really present in the Eucharist would be at least materially heretical because the teaching meets the requirements of infallibility set by the First Vatican Council.

The overwhelming majority of heresies

in the church today are of the material, not the formal, kind. They involve Catholics across the entire ecclesiastical spectrum whose beliefs are sometimes at odds with certain infallible teachings of the church, but without their realizing it.

Similarly, the overwhelming majority of heresy charges today do not involve heresy at all. The rejection of a non-infallible teaching is never heretical.

But to the extent that heresy does exist, whether material or formal, what should or can the church do about it?

For some Catholics who have a seeming abundance of bile juice there is only one answer: Expose and root out the heretics by any means available. In the past, those means involved inquisitorial procedures, torture and even death (the proverbial burning at the stake).

Those methods have not disappeared from the religious scene. Indeed, some of the more extreme Muslim countries have taken a leaf out of our medieval Catholic book. A death sentence imposed by fundamentalist clerics in Iran, still hangs over novelist Salman Rushdie for his alleged defamation of Islam.

Catholic heresy-hunters, however, lack the capacity to implement such measures, so they pursue other courses of action, listed in descending order of severity: (1)

Get the alleged heretic fired from work (in the academic world, the tenure system makes that practically impossible, but at the parish and diocesan levels it's a sadder story); (2) Have the alleged heretic's writings banned from Catholic newspapers, bookstores, schools and parish education programs; (3) Have the alleged heretic prohibited from speaking at Catholic events, and, where that proves unsuccessful, create adverse publicity to discourage or impede attendance; and (4) Maintain a constant drumbeat of criticism in letters to bishops and editors, and through articles and editorials in like-minded publications.

By contrast, the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner insisted that the most effective way for the church to combat heresy is by teaching the truth more persuasively. Pope John XXIII expressed the same view at the Second Vatican Council.

The church, he said, must teach "by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations."

For some Catholics, however, condemnations are more gratifying.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. This column was written before Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on dissent was released June 30.

Simple human kindness shows great charity

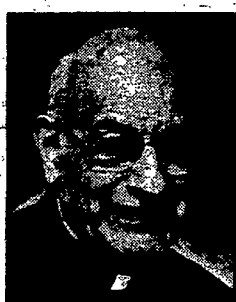
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 10:25-37. (R1) Deuteronomy 30:10-14. (R2) Colossians 1:15-20.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in his autobiography *Treasure in Clay*, recounts a visit he made to a leper colony in Buluba, Africa. He intended to give a silver crucifix to each of the 500 lepers.

The first person who came forward, however, was so disfigured by the ravages of leprosy that Sheen was repulsed by the sight. The man's left arm was eaten off at the elbow; so he extended his right hand. This hand, too, was unspeakably corrupted by this disease.

Repelled by the sight, Sheen held the crucifix above the man's palm and dropped it into the decaying flesh. Instantly, Sheen was aware of how unchristlike was what he had done. Remorseful, Sheen dug his fingers into the man's leprous hand, removed the crucifix, and then put it back gently into the man's hand. Respectfully, Sheen handed a crucifix to each of the other 499 lepers and, in the exchange, learned to love them.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked Jesus. Jesus replied by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Did you notice that nowhere in the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the word "good"



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

used? Yet the word "good" has become synonymous with this man who dared to be a neighbor to a stranger.

Why do we call him good? Because he did not turn his back on someone in need. So often when we see someone who is hurting, we tend to look away, like the priest and the Levite in the parable. Perhaps they did not want to be made ceremonially unclean by touching one suspected of being dead. Possibly they were just in a hurry. Still, they both turned their back. The Samaritan was good because he turned his face on the man and showed him human kindness.

The Samaritan was good because he was willing to disrupt his schedule to help a man in distress. Time is such a precious commodity in our world.

Sometimes the greatest act of Christian charity is the willingness to give someone else your time.

When Clara Barton learned of the terrible plight of the wounded soldiers at the battle of Second Bull Run, she immediately left the security of Washington, D.C., for the battlefield. Arriving on a Sunday she labored all day and on through the night. Exhaustion could not stop her as she bandaged one man and consoled another. Even the skirmishes nearby did not deter her. When other medical personnel took the train to reach safety, she stayed on.

Like the Samaritan, Clara was willing to get involved, to sacrifice her time. Seldom do we have the opportunity to schedule when we need to be involved. Usually it is thrust upon us when we least expect it and are ill-prepared. Surprise will always be our first response. Inconvenience our first thought. Unwillingness our first desire. Then we remember the word, "good." And we swallow our loathsomeness and take time to help.

Mother Teresa said, "The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for or unwanted, of being deserted and alone. The greatest evil is the lack of love and

charity, and an indifference toward one's neighbor who may be the victim of poverty or disease or exploited and at the end of his life, left at a roadside."

Jesus called us his brothers and sisters. Not just us, but everyone else in need. Like Bishop Sheen, retrieving the cross from a decaying hand, we must say, "Friend, what can I do to help?"

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 13

Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 10:34-11:1

Tuesday, July 14

Isaiah 7:1-9; Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday, July 15

Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16;

Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday, July 16

Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19;

Matthew 11:25-30

Friday, July 17

Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8;

Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday, July 18

Micah 2:1-5; Matthew 12:14-21

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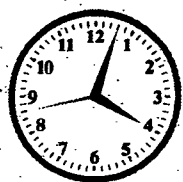
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