

COLUMNISTS

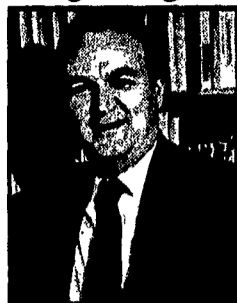
Hierarchy of truths lead to core of faith

The Second Vatican Council taught that there is a hierarchy of truths within the body of Catholic doctrines. When comparing doctrines with one another, the council's Decree on Ecumenism declared, Catholic theologians "should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or hierarchy of truths since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith." (n. 11).

This means that not all official teachings of the church are of equal importance. Some teachings pertain to the very essence or foundation of the Christian faith. Others are not part of the foundation at all. They are secondary rather than primary components of Catholic faith. Still other teachings are even further removed from that foundation or core. At best, such teachings are tertiary or even marginal elements of Catholic doctrine.

There was an important ecumenical reason for the council's introduction of this concept of a hierarchy of truths. When engaged in formal dialogue with non-Catholic Christians, the Catholic participants must not demand of the non-Catholics more than what the Gospel itself demands.

We cannot insist for example, that unless the non-Catholic dialogue partners believe that Mary is the mediatrix of all



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

graces, there is no possibility of unity. So long as we find common ground on those matters of faith and morals that pertain to the core of the Gospel, there is no need for demanding any more than that as a basis of full intercommunion.

Some other examples might be helpful, going in reverse order, from the nonessential to the essential.

The tertiary and/or marginal elements of Catholic teaching and practice would include (1) the existence of the minor orders of lector and acolyte; (2) belief in guardian angels; (3) the existence of the College of Cardinals; (4) the reserving of episcopal appointments to the pope; (5) belief in limbo (which the Catechism of the Catholic Church doesn't even mention); (6) the practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (as distinct from belief

in the Real Presence, which is part of the essence of Catholic faith); (7) papal canonization of saints; (8) obligatory celibacy for priests of the Roman rite.

To be sure, there would be differences among theologians, and between theologians and other church members, about other items that might be added to this list. Some theologians would hold that the rules of eligibility for priestly ordination would fall within this category, including the questions of women's and the validity of Anglican orders. On the other hand, these were among the examples of secondary objects of infallibility given in Cardinal Ratzinger's commentary of last summer on the papal decree, *Ad tuendam fidem*, which amended certain canons in the Code pertaining to theological dissent.

Examples of secondary elements of Catholic doctrine are more difficult to provide and agree upon. These are teachings that are rooted in at least part of the church's tradition but that cannot be traced back to the beginnings and have no explicit basis in Sacred Scripture.

In the realm of sexual morality, these might include the teachings on in-vitro fertilization, sterilization, contraception, and homosexuality. They could also include the teaching that there are seven sacraments; the diocesan and monoeiscopal

structure of the church; papal infallibility; and the rule that only an ordained priest can preside at the Eucharist.

Examples of teachings that are at the core of Catholic faith can be drawn from the teachings of Jesus himself, the Apostles and the creeds. Thus: the existence of a loving, triune God who created us, sustains and guides us, and destines us for eternal life; the divinity of Jesus Christ; the redemptive significance of his life, death and resurrection; our transformation into new creatures in Christ by the Holy Spirit, who is the power of reconciliation, healing and new life; the church as mystery of sacrament, that is, a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God (Pope Paul VI); the forgiveness of sins; the mandate to love one another; the communion of saints; our hope in eternal life.

The hierarchy of truths, however, is not meant to provide an escape hatch for Catholics who prefer not to accept certain official teachings. Rather, it serves as a defense against the tendency of some other Catholics to confuse secondary and tertiary teachings with essential teachings, thereby undermining what truly pertains to the foundation of the Christian faith.

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

'Hugs' help us to be a family of living stones

5th Sunday of Easter: (R3) John 14:11-12. (R1) Acts 6:1-7. (R2) 1 Peter 2:4-9.

In a park in California there is a rock hanging on a rope with a large sign that reads: "Weather Station. Check the Rock: If it's wet, it's raining. If it's moving, it's windy. If you can't see it, it's foggy. If the rock is gone, it's a tornado."

Today we reflect on a stone — Jesus!

Builders begin with the foundation. A building is as strong as its foundation.

The leaning Tower of Pisa has a foundation only 10 feet deep. Moreover, it was built on marshy land. The word "pisa" means "marshy land." As a result, before it was even completed, it began to lean and sink. It sinks 1/20th of an inch each year. At present it is 17 feet out of plumb. By the year 2007 the 810-year old tower will have leaned too far and will collapse.

In contrast with this tower with its 10-foot foundation, great European cathedrals have foundations 40 to 50 deep.

To build a great life, like building a great cathedral, we start with a solid foundation. The best foundation for life is Christ.

First, we must make Christ the model for our lives. His values, his truth are the foundation of a lasting society. We must imitate him: his love, his compassion, his acceptance and his forgiving spirit.



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Secondly, Christ should be our mentor. Christ is not some dead, historical figure we admire. He is more. He dwells with us, helping and guiding us daily.

Max Lucado, in *The Grip of Grace*, tells of his boyhood days when he and his friends played football on the street each afternoon. One dad in the neighborhood, a die-hard football buff, would sometimes join them. He always played for whichever team was losing that day.

"His appearance in the huddle changed the whole ball game," Lucado wrote. "He was confident, strong, and most of all, he had a plan."

The kids, fired up by his leadership, played with new determination.

Lucado said that Jesus does the same for us. He joins the losing team, and his ap-

pearance in the game changes everything. He inspires hope, confidence, courage and love. He has a plan; and those who trust in him and follow him win in the end.

Finally, Jesus is the mortar that joins our lives with one another in the Christian community.

You and I are living stones of the house of God. A stack of stones lying in a field may have little value. But put them together on a firm foundation and join them with mortar and you can fashion a skyscraper or cathedral.

So when we build our lives on Christ, we become a part of a very special family, the church.

One fall, Linda, a young woman, was traveling alone up the rugged highway from Alberta, Canada, to the Yukon in a rundown Honda Civic. The first night she stayed in a small hotel. The next morning she had breakfast with two truckers.

"Where are you headed?" one asked.

"To Whitehorse," Linda responded.

"In that little Civic? No way! The pass is too dangerous in weather like this."

"Well, I'm going to try," Linda said.

"Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you," the trucker suggested.

"No way am I going to let you touch me!" Linda angrily replied.

The truckers chuckled, "Not like that! We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains."

They did.

In the journey of life, we too need to be "HUGGED": with fellow Catholics leading us safely ahead, and those behind encouraging us along, with Christ as our model, our mentor, and the mortar joining us all together as a family of living stones in his temple, the church.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, May 3
1 Corinthians 15:1-8; John 14:6-14

Tuesday, May 4
Acts 14:19-28; John 14:27-31

Wednesday, May 5
Acts 15:1-6; John 15:1-8

Thursday, May 6
Acts 15:7-21; John 15:9-11

Friday, May 7
Acts 15:22-31; John 15:12-17

Saturday, May 8
Acts 16:1-10; John 15:18-21

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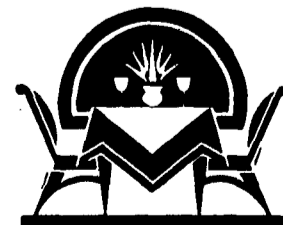
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