

# COLUMNISTS

## 'Conservative' Catholics pine for error

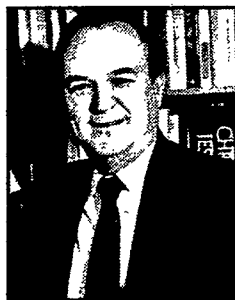
Paul Wilkes, author of several books about Catholicism, spent the recent spring semester at the University of Notre Dame as the Visiting Welch Professor in American Studies. His reflections appeared in the May 1 issue of *America* magazine, "Catholic Spoken Here: A Report from the Academic Front."

This week's column concerns a friendly suggestion Wilkes recently made to me. He asked that I not use the word "conservative" in my next four columns. Since I had just written more than half a dozen in anticipation of a projected absence from the university, I wondered if I had, in fact, already used the dreaded "c" word in any of those pieces.

I had, but in a very meager fashion. There was a reference in a column on an internal dispute between moderates and "conservatives" in the North American Sikh community (the term had been used in the press reports).

There was one other reference, repeated in a second column, to an organization known as Legatus, headed by the former pizza king, Thomas Monaghan.

I was intrigued by Wilkes' suggestion because it was not the first time I had received it. Father Thomas O'Meara, OP, a



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

friend and colleague, had also urged me to stop using the word. It is too often-misapplied, he said, to people, viewpoints and organizations whose agenda is not the conserving of what is truly traditional and essential in Catholicism — a 2000-year-old religious tradition that is itself inevitably conservative.

He pointed out that those who are most frequently referred to as conservatives or restorationists. (Father O'Meara is the author of *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, published by Paulist Press in 1990.) They are Catholics who have not had the advantage of any advanced training in the study of sacred Scripture or Catholic doctrine. And their knowledge of the history of the church is spotty at best. For them, the

process of "conserving" is actually one of "restoring" something from a very thin slice of Catholic history, usually from the Baroque period of the 17th and 18th centuries, or something out of the devotional life of 19th and early-20th century Catholicism.

For example, many Catholics who claim to prefer the Tridentine Latin Mass of Pius V to the so-called "new Mass" of Paul VI and Vatican II do not realize that the latter is actually more traditional than the former. The reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council are more deeply rooted in the worship of the early church than are the reforms mandated by the Council of Trent and Pius V.

The Tridentine Mass owed less to the church of the first four centuries than to late medieval eucharistic theology and devotional practices. By the time the Tridentine Mass was set in place, the Eucharist was seen more as an unbloody sacrifice than as an act of thanksgiving (the literal meaning of the word Eucharist) and a communal meal.

Holy Communion became for many Catholics primarily an object of adoration (via Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament) and an occasion for processions (on the feast of Corpus Christi). Actual reception of Communion declined

precipitously as more and more lay people saw themselves as unworthy to consume the Lord's body into their own.

In formally approving what was for the 16th century a "new Mass," Pius V imposed the Roman usage on the whole church and essentially cast aside the richly diverse, local liturgical heritages that had been flourishing for centuries throughout the rest of the church, in both East and West.

To be sure, there are other examples of false conservatism beyond the liturgy.

Some think it "conservative" to hold that the pope is, in effect, an absolute monarch over the whole church, that he alone is a vicar of Christ, that everything he says or writes pertaining to faith and morals must be received as if it were infallible, that he has always had the exclusive authority to appoint bishops, and that such powers as these belong to the papacy by divine right, i.e., because Christ so willed it.

These are not "conservative" views; they are doctrinally and historically erroneous views. Is it not an injustice to conservatism to call error "conservative"?

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

## Kindness lies at the heart of Christianity

13th Sunday of the Year (June 27): (R3) Matthew 10:37-42. (R1) 2 Kings 4:8-11, 14-16. (R2) Romans 6:3-4, 8-11.

The theme of Sunday's reading is kindness. "Whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple — amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."

When writer Henry James was saying goodbye once to his young nephew Billy, his brother's son, James said something that Billy never forgot. "There are three things that are important in human life," said Henry James. "The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind." One of the traits of a follower of Christ is kindness.

Kindness is a reflection of the image of God in which we were created. From time to time we hear of a heroic rescue performed by a member of the animal kingdom. Dogs have been known to pull children out of danger. Dolphins have been said to rescue swimmers. But kindness is primarily the domain of human beings. Often we hear of man's inhumanity to man. But we should put in a word for acts of human kindness, for they are far more prevalent.

At the age of 37, journalist Mike McIn-



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

tyre hitchhiked across the country to see what America and Americans were really like these days. He began in San Francisco and ended at Cape Fear, N.C. Mike reported that his whole trip was a lesson in the kindness of strangers. Everywhere he went, he found caring and generous people, who went out of their way to help him. At the end of his trip, Mike realized he had a new respect for his country and its people. Sometimes, we forget that kind people are everywhere. Kindness is a reflection of God's image within us.

Remember Christians are people who have been commanded to be kind. We don't have any choice about it. Christ told us to love our enemies. He told us what we do to the least we do to himself. He said the judgment of the world would

be made on what we did to others. Obviously, this is good strategy. We overcome evil by good.

It should matter to us that there are people in need — not just because we are nice people but because there was a time when we were in need. We are the recipients of grace. God loved us when we were helpless and undeserving. So we ought to look around for others who are helpless and perhaps even undeserving so that we may pass on the love we ourselves have received.

One day, a student asked anthropologist Margaret Mead for the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. He expected the answer to be a clay pot or perhaps a fish hook or grinding stone. Her answer was "a healed femur." The femur, of course, is a bone in the leg. Mead explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle, the survival of the fittest, reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of caring, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

At the heart of our faith is caring. The song put it this way: "And they'll know that we are Christians by our love, by our

love." Christians do not live by the law of the jungle, but by the law of love. Great Catholics have always been great givers. For Christ was truly a Man for Others. And he called us to be men and women for others. The very heart of our faith is the spirit of kindness, caring and giving, like Christ's.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, June 28**  
Genesis 18:16-33 Matthew 8:18-22  
**Tuesday, June 29**  
Acts 12:1-11; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; Matthew 16:13-19  
**Wednesday, June 30**  
Genesis 21:5, 8-20; Matthew 8:28-34  
**Thursday, July 1**  
Genesis 22:1-19; Matthew 9:1-8  
**Friday, July 2**  
Genesis 23:1-4, 19, 24:1-8, 62-67; Matthew 9:9-13  
**Saturday, July 3**  
Ephesians 2:19-22; John 20:24-29

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