

COLUMNISTS

Vatican II vs. papal 'non-historical orthodoxy'

Many church officials, especially bishops who are publishers of diocesan newspapers, do not like to read about problems in the church. The message they want their flock to hear is something along the lines of: "The Holy Father is in the chair of Peter, and all is well."

These officials seem oblivious to the fact that many of their people do not believe such a message, having access to other sources of information, including experience, that contradict it.

An article in *Commonweal* magazine (9/8/00), "Two Versions of History," is the sort of item that such officials would want to keep out of their papers. Its author is Robert J. Egan, SJ, professor of theology and spirituality at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.

Church historian, John W. O'Malley, SJ, professor at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., endorsed the essay in glowing terms. "I can hardly imagine, a more judicious assessment in just a few paragraphs of the two ways of dealing with the church as a historical reality 'in the modern world.' It gets to the heart of the great cultural divide in Catholicism today." (*Letters*, 10/6/00.)

Father Egan suggests that during the last decade two rival versions of 19th and



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

20th century Catholic history emerged and now compete for our allegiance.

Version one holds that, in the face of liberalism and modernity, the official church, and especially the papacy, courageously refused to compromise and set itself firmly against these twin evils.

To succeed, it was necessary to strengthen the power of the papacy and make its infallible teaching role explicit. Although prior popes were also involved, the key players were the recently beatified Pius IX and the First Vatican Council. Their policies and spirit were carried forward in varying degrees and in different styles by Leo XIII, Pius X, Pius XI, and Pius XII.

According to this version, the Second Vatican Council completed the work of Vatican I by providing a fuller theologi-

cal understanding of the roles of bishops and laity. However, the teachings of Vatican II were distorted, especially in North America and Western Europe, under the impact of individualism, egalitarianism, secularism, and the complacency and self-indulgence of the middle classes.

"Providentially," version one insists, "these trends were checked and then reversed by the papacy of John Paul II, which re-established balance and reinforced Catholic identity."

Version two views liberalism and modernity as movements of mixed value. The appropriate response to them is not condemnation and resistance, but careful discernment and discrimination between the good and the bad elements.

In this version, popes of the early 19th century, especially Pius IX, represent a "tragedy" for Catholicism, because of the lost opportunity to shape and influence the direction of these historic movements in support of democracy, human rights, objective scholarship, and openness to varieties of religious experience.

Given its anti-intellectualism and witch-hunting strategy, stifling Catholic thought for half a century, the papacy of Pius X was "tragedy replayed as farce." An effort to engage the modern world after the World War II was silenced by

Pius XII, most of its leaders living to see their views vindicated by Vatican II.

In this version, the council represents the dramatic, decisive turning point in Catholic theology and practice. We are now in a period of backlash, which the church must break through if it is to complete the council's work.

In version two, the present papacy, for all of its accomplishments, has functioned as a counterrevolutionary force, a restorationist interlude, when the conciliar ideals of dialogue, engagement, collegiality, and the rejection of coercion seem "obscured and even betrayed."

Father Egan notes that the present "conservatism" is actually "brand new," resting on the personal theology of John Paul II with a view of the papacy that only originated early in the 19th century.

Version one, says Father O'Malley, "whatever its other merits, does not take history seriously," church history seems "utterly irrelevant."

Michael Novak once characterized this approach as "non-historical orthodoxy." To understand the full meaning of that brilliant phrase is to understand the central problem with version one.

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

God watches over all of us

32nd Sunday of the Year (Nov.12): (R3) Mark 12:38-44. (R1) 1 Kings 17:10-16. (R2) Hebrews 9:24-28.

Two poor widows in Sunday's readings became rich because they gave when it hurt most. The first widow was gathering sticks. A stranger approached and asked her for some water to drink. As she was going for the water, he called out, "Please bring along a bit of bread."

This was more than the widow could handle. "As the Lord, your God, lives," the widow replied, "I have only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die."

The stranger was the prophet Elijah, who knew God as a bountiful, giving God. So Elijah said to this despondent woman, "Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first make a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the Lord God of Israel says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'"

The widow did as Elijah said. And "the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

of oil run dry, as the Lord had foretold through Elijah."

The widow in the Gospel is known to all of us. She made her way quietly through a crowd gathered in the temple. Some threw large amounts of money into the temple treasury. Rabbinic law forbade putting just one coin; the smallest allowed was two. The widow put in the smallest amount possible. Jesus was watching and said to his disciples, "This poor widow contributed more than all the others. The rich gave from their surplus; she gave from her want, all that she had to live on."

Sociologists reckon that 26 million Americans are only one paycheck away from bankruptcy. It's tough! As one fellow said, "I used to live in the lap of lux-

ury — then luxury stood up."

I read that it costs more to buy a car today than it cost Columbus to make three voyages to the New World. Often both parents now have to work to make ends meet. Everything is so expensive today. And to make matters worse, credit is still relatively easy to come by.

For one thing, don't give up. That's what the first widow was ready to do. Before Elijah got hold of her, she was going to go home and make preparations for both herself and her son to die. That's about as desperate as one can become. Sometimes life can look that bleak to one. What must one do? Never give up. Go on!

Secondly, trust God! For some, that is hard to do. A father was teaching his son to swim. The lad splashed wildly with both arms and, kicking one leg, called to his father, "Look, I'm swimming!" All the time he was holding onto the bottom of the pool with his big toe. Many of us are like that in our faith. "I have faith!" we declare, but all the while one toe remains on the bottom! We do not abandon our fears and trust God. Such faith gets harder for us as we get older.

Finally, remember that God is always watching.

Jesus was watching the second widow. She had not quit trusting. Those two coins were all she had, yet she willing gave them to God. That's faith! No wonder Jesus praised her. We need to realize that in Elijah's day, God was watching the first widow as well. Most of all, we need to realize that God watches all of us and watches over us. We need but trust.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, November 13

Titus 1:1-9; Luke 17:1-6

Tuesday, November 14

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14;

Luke 17:7-10

Wednesday, November 15

Titus 3:1-7; Luke 17:11-19

Thursday, November 16

Philemon 7-20; Luke 17:20-25

Friday, November 17

2 John 4-9; Luke 17:26-37

Saturday, November 18

3 John 5-8; Luke 18:1-8

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