

Private devotions vs. church 'health'

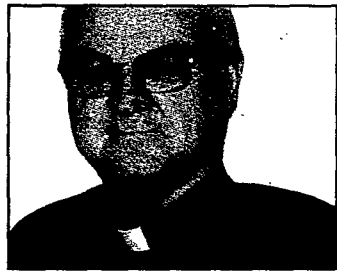
Father James Martin, associate editor of the Jesuit weekly *America*, is to be commended for initiating the "Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions" series to run during the Lenten and Easter seasons. He invited contributors to write about a devotion that has proven especially meaningful in their life and to indicate why the devotion might appeal to other Catholics as well.

In his introduction to the series, Father Martin noted that, for some older Catholics, the church's devotional life has never lost its appeal. For many of them, traditional devotions provide a link to the Catholicism of their youth.

Others, however, regard devotions as "inconsistent with a mature faith, antithetical to a contemporary understanding of religion, overly reliant on things — beads, medals, scapulars — and even faintly superstitious." For such Catholics, he writes, devotions "are to be avoided, not embraced."

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy provides an important guideline for evaluating private devotions of every kind. They should be "so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them" (n. 13).

The conciliar teaching is



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

consistent with the evidence of history. Private devotions flourish when the church's liturgical life is poorly understood or when it does not satisfy the spiritual needs of ordinary people.

This is a point effectively made by an expert in sacramental and liturgical theology, Franciscan Father Regis Duffy, on the faculty of St. Bonaventure University. In his article on devotions in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, he writes: "As a general rule, when liturgical prayer and ritual are less accessible to people's understanding and participation, there is usually an increase in devotions."

In the Middle Ages, for example, when liturgical understanding and participation were at one of their lowest levels, some lay people would run from church to church on a Sunday morning in order to see the host and chalice elevated immediately after the consecration. They believed that this would somehow prolong their youthfulness or protect them from diseases of the eye.

Prior to Vatican II, Cath-

olics often recited the rosary at Mass for "something to do" while the priest performed the rites and recited the words of the Mass, in Latin and with his back to the congregation.

Benediction served a similar, though more relevant, purpose, namely to provide lay people with an opportunity for active participation in a ritual that was at least tangentially connected with the Eucharist. The congregation was allowed to pray and sing aloud, and the showing of and blessing with the host encased in the monstrance was easy for the people to understand and respond to.

In the light of our own renewed understanding of the communal nature of the Eucharist and of the church's encouragement of full lay participation in it, it would be as incongruous now to have Benediction immediately following Mass as it would be for a chef to recommend entrees after the customers had just eaten. Jesus left us the Eucharist to be eaten, not adored.

If Catholics are less interested today in private devotions, it is likely a sign that the church is spiritually healthier because its spiritual life is rooted more directly and more deeply in the liturgy and the Eucharist.

The liturgy, after all, is "far superior" to any private devotion.

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

Discomfort is product of dissent

To the editor:

I write in response to the letter of Dr. Anthony D'Amico (March 13). He wrote to complain of the anti-war stance he hears from Catholic leaders. He suggested that the Church is no longer teaching doctrine, but is putting forth a political point of view. While he may disagree with the opposition of the Roman Catholic Church to a U.S. invasion of Iraq, he is mistaken on several points. When he criticizes Bishop Clark, Sister Schoelles and Father McBrien for their reflections in their newspaper columns, he is criticizing them for following Pope John Paul II. On January 13, 2003, the Pope said, "NO TO WAR! War is not always inevitable. International law, honest dialogue, solidarity between States, the noble exercise of Diplomacy: These are methods worthy of individuals and nations in resolving their differences" (emphasis in original).

After speaking of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Pope continued, "And what are we to say of the threat of a war which could strike the people of Iraq, the land of the prophets, a people already sorely tried by more than twelve years of embargo? War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations. As the Charter of the United Nations Organization and international law itself remind us, war cannot

be decided upon, even when it is a matter of ensuring the common good, except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions ..."

I regret that Dr. D'Amico does not feel welcome in the Catholic Church. However his discomfort arises not because the Church is political, but because he dissents from Catholic moral teaching on war, especially as that teaching has been developed by Pope John Paul II.

Father Gary Tyman, pastor, Holy Rosary & Most Precious Blood churches

War is more than politics

To the editor:

I read with interest Dr. Anthony D'Amico's letter about feeling unwelcome in the Catholic Church in light of the calls for peace in the Middle East. I agree with Dr. D'Amico that Saddam Hussein wishes us ill, and I also agree that President Bush is a Christian. Any person who has been baptized into a Christian community and has not explicitly renounced their faith is a Christian. The challenge for Christians, however, is to be faithful to Jesus our Savior and to carry on his mission in the world. This challenge comes to Christians in Iraq and the U.S. alike.

War, like abortion, is more than a political issue. It is a profoundly moral issue, because it leads to the suffering and death of human beings. In considering whether we can justify going to war, Christians must look to the teachings of Jesus and the guidance of our leaders. Dr. D'Amico in his letter did not mention Pope John Paul, who called on all Catholics to pray for peace last Ash Wednesday.

It may be that one's opinion about the role of the United Nations in the potential war in Iraq is a matter of politics. But a Christian's attitude towards killing can never be just a matter of politics. It may also be that in some situations force is the lesser of evils. Yet, when my father, who was not a

Christian, call his service in he declared that war solve ly, this seems that each ge learn anew.

Lyndon

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