

Private devotion should reflect liturgy

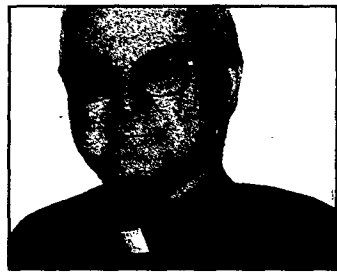
This column is not intended as a debunking exercise, although it offers critical reflections on some of Catholicism's most popular pre-Vatican II devotions, a few of which have engaged the interest of some younger, conservative Catholics.

I pointed out in last week's column that the decline in the popularity of certain private devotions is not necessarily indicative of a spiritual malaise in the post-Vatican II church. Nor is the new interest on the part of some younger Catholics in various pre-conciliar devotions indicative of a resurgence of spiritual well-being.

The rosary can serve as our primary example because it has undoubtedly been the most popular private devotion since the time of the Reformation. Contrary to a widely-held belief, the rosary was not invented by St. Dominic in the 13th century. The use of beads and knotted string as a device to count prayers antedated him and has existed for centuries in other religious traditions.

By the 11th century, the custom of saying 150 Our Fathers — often in three sets of 50 — as a substitute for the 150 Psalms had become widespread among devout, but illiterate, laity. This so-called "poor person's breviary" consisted of a string of beads that were used to count the prayers. The beads were called *paternosters* ("Our Father").

In the 12th century, as



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Marian piety experienced a resurgence, the angel's salutation from Luke's Gospel ("Hail, [Mary], full of grace. The Lord is with you.") was added to the Our Fathers.

Gradually, popular piety created "psalters" dedicated to Jesus or Mary, which concentrated the individual's attention on various biblical scenes (the "mysteries" of the rosary). Perhaps because the Dominicans did so much to foster this devotion, their founder, St. Dominic, was widely regarded as the rosary's originator.

Why did so popular a devotion decline so quickly after Vatican II? As Franciscan Father Dominic Monti writes in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*: "Both the contemporary liturgical movement and a renewed emphasis on the reading of Scripture have reduced the dominance of the rosary in Catholic devotional life."

The inescapable fact is that, in contrast to the Middle Ages, most lay persons today are literate. If they wish, the laity can read and pray each of the psalms on their own, without any need

to substitute Our Fathers or Hail Marys in repetitive fashion.

Moreover, now that the liturgy has been renewed and reformed, the laity need no longer look to private devotional practices like the rosary to keep themselves spiritually focused during the celebration of Mass. Indeed, in his 1974 apostolic exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI explicitly discouraged the private recitation of the rosary during the Eucharist (n. 48).

What, then, of the recitation of the rosary apart from Mass? Again, there is no wish or intent here to discourage, much less demean, the use of the rosary for spiritual enrichment. This could also be accomplished, however, by meditating on the mysteries of our redemption, using sacred Scripture as the basis for reflection.

What of novenas, the Nine First Fridays and the Five First Saturdays? Again, there is nothing essentially wrong with such devotions, but neither is there anything deficient in the spirituality of a Catholic who shows no interest in them.

As the Eucharist became more central to the life of the church, devotions related to it receded in popularity. And that is because, according to the council, the liturgy is "far superior" to any private devotion.

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

How could warfare be found just?

To the editor:

Thank you for the continuing coverage of issues relevant to our nation's war plans and providing a forum for discussion of this grave moral question. Your reporting is of utmost importance and a real service to our diocesan community.

I respectfully offer the following response to the March 6 cover story, "Can preventive war be just?" and to the concerns expressed by Dr. D'Amico in his letter of March 13.

The word "just" as defined by Catholic Magisterial teaching means "right relationship." And, the moral core of Christianity is found in Matthew 25:40, in Jesus' words, "What you do to the least of my people you do to Me." With these precepts in mind, let me ask:

- Is the dropping of hundreds of bombs and missiles on a weakened population, nearly half of which are children, an example of "right relationship?"

- Is the draining of resources from the most vulnerable in our society — a number rising every day — in order to pay for such an assault, "right relationship?"

- Is the willingness to sacrifice the health and life of our earnest young men and women an example of "right relationship," especially when international leaders and defense experts have proposed effective alternatives to war?

- Why should the wise and

eloquent, enduring and enlightened teachings of our faith be subordinate to any national leader or ideology?

Perhaps, the discussion we need in our churches is this: On the last day, who will be our Judge — our political leaders or the Good Shepherd? Will we be judged as citizens of any nation, or as disciples of Christ? As we continue our reflections, it may help to recall, as Thomas Merton notes in *The Sign of Jonas*, how the local leaders answered as they crucified Jesus: "We have no king but Caesar."

Judith E. Kiehl
Pastoral Associate
Holy Trinity Church
Webster

Says 'amen' to doctor's perspective

To the editor:

I would like to give a resounding AMEN! to Dr. D'Amico (March 13). Not only would Hussein joyfully murder our children and grandchildren — as he does the Iraqi children, he'd put all the clergy high on his list.

I, too, feel more and more an outsider in a church that is so politically correct that we do not even pray for our service men and women who will risk their lives to protect ours.

Why can't we admit that there is true evil in the world, and it must be combatted with actions not just "peace talks?"

Ann Marie Wilson
County Road 47
Dansville

Sees lack of spirituality in diocese

To the editor:

This is with regard to all the critical responses to Dr. Anthony D'Amico's letter (March 13).

For many, many months we have been bombarded from all aspects of news media concerning the war with

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1136 Buffalo Road
P.O. Box 24379
Rochester, NY 14624
585/529-9530

800/600-3628 outside Rochester
<http://www.catholiccourier.com>
e-mail: info@catholiccourier.com

President
Bishop Matthew H. Clark

General Manager/Editor
Kären M. Franz
kfranz@catholiccourier.com

Editorial Department
Assistant Editor
Jennifer Ficaglia
jficaglia@catholiccourier.com

Staff Writers
Rob Cullivan
rcullivan@catholiccourier.com

Mike Latona
mlatona@catholiccourier.com

Staff Photographer
Karin von Voigtlander
kvonvoigtlander@catholiccourier.com

Editorial Assistant
Louis Litzenberger
llitzenberger@catholiccourier.com

Photo Intern
Rebecca Gosselin
Business Department

Office Manager
Mary DiPonzio
mdiponzio@catholiccourier.com

Administrative Assistant
Arlene S. Gall
agall@catholiccourier.com

Circulation Manager
Donna Stubbings
dstubbings@catholiccourier.com

Graphics Department
Graphics Manager
Kim Parks

kparks@catholiccourier.com
Graphic Artist
Linda Jeanne Rivers
lrivers@catholiccourier.com

Advertising Department
Display Advertising Executives

Tracy Moses
tmoses@catholiccourier.com
Donald P. Wilson
dwilson@catholiccourier.com

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