

Formulating a new Catholic apologetics



Mike Crup/Catholic Courier

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about their faith. The front runner, John Kerry, is a self-professed Catholic. Of course, when you look at his voting record on the abortion issue, you begin to realize that he is simply talking the talk. This particular year, it is politically correct to be "religious." The political machine sees the religious side as a "good" for their candidates to have in their stockpile of political arms. Mr. Kerry, however, doesn't walk the walk of his professed Catholic faith. He is about as pro-abortion as you can get!

At the November 2003 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting, the Bishops spoke about just this type of politician. They discussed at length what the Bishops should do to prevent politicians from using their Catholic faith while giving slander to it by their reception of the sacraments of the living when they publicly defy the teachings of God and His Church. A Law of God pertains to ALL people. Since politicians are in the limelight, they are more apt to give slander than you and I if we flout God's Law.

In a time when we are striving to have zero tolerance to child abuse in our ranks, isn't it time to have zero tolerance to politicians who advocate the killing, the dismembering, the poisoning of human children in the womb by abortion? When will we demand equal treatment of the least as our Faith demands? Mr. Kerry seems to be "Catholic" only when it is beneficial to his

political welfare, but he is absolutely pro-abortion!

Barbara Fredericks
Birr Street
Rochester

Column is challenging

To the editor:

Please continue carrying "Essays in Theology" by Father Richard McBrien in the *Courier*. His column is by far my favorite because he challenges me to think outside the confines of over-worked assumptions and tired ideas. Often, after reading his contribution to the *Courier*, I meditate on his topic and make an effort to form my own opinion based on his ideas. Father McBrien's column is a breath of fresh air.

Even those who hate it must admit that he makes them think.

Joan G. Milley
Greenway Blvd.
Churchville

Enjoys new, old columns

To the editor:

I have enjoyed reading the columns by Father Ron Rolheiser and Father John Dietzen and hope that the *Catholic Courier* will continue to carry them, along with Father Richard McBrien's "Essays in Theology."

I look forward to your new format.

Sheryl B. Zabel
Lyndon Road
Fairport

Richard Gaillardetz, Murray/Bacik Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo, has recently published a theologically insightful article on Catholic apologetics ("Do We Need a New(er) Apologetics?," *America*, 2/2/04).

In the first part, Gaillardetz is critical of the approach taken by some of the newest apologists, like Scott Hahn and Karl Keating, some of whom are converts to Catholicism from Protestant fundamentalism.

Gaillardetz faults them for their use of Catholic fundamentalism — both biblical and doctrinal — to combat Protestant fundamentalism, their tendency to make all church teachings equally important and equally binding, their us-versus-them approach to non-Catholic Christians, and their romanticized view of the church, as if it were only divine in character, and therefore perfect, and not at all human, and therefore weak and even sinful.

In the second part, Gaillardetz sketches a path that other Catholics might follow in developing a new apologetics, without the drawbacks of the approach taken by fundamentalistic types.

He suggests that, if an explanation and defense of the Catholic faith is going to have any claim to credibility, it needs to be, first, "passionate and positive." It ought to manifest some measure of love and even enthusiasm for the message,



Father Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

and to present it positively, but without romanticizing it.

On the other hand, a mere debunking of pre-Vatican II expressions without offering constructive alternatives is of little or no value.

Second, the approach has to be "dialogical," which means that it can neither demonize opposing views nor act as if all views are equally true. Dialogue does not require a compromising of one's convictions, but it does demand a respectful listening to the other's views and a readiness to change one's mind, if that seems to be in order.

Third, the new apologetics, formulated in the light of the Second Vatican Council, must be "ecumenical" in character. The council's Decree on Ecumenism set aside the pre-Vatican II approach that viewed all Protestants as being in fundamental error, outside the "one, true church."

Against this view, the council acknowledged that the division of the church happened because of faults committed on both sides, and affirmed that there is

authentic Christian truth outside the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church must get its own household in order, for it is only by a return to the original spirit and moral demands of the Gospel that both sides can hope to come together in unity.

Fourth, the new apologetics must be "historically responsible." It cannot present tradition as if it were "a perfectly seamless whole, an always unanimous testimony to the steady and organic development of Catholic truths." The new apologetics must be able to admit that there have been dramatic discontinuities and even reversals in Catholic tradition.

Fifth, the Catholic apologist must be "culturally engaged." Church teachings, if true, have to make a difference in ordinary life. An effective apologetics will tap into the riches already present in culture and in human consciousness. It is a matter of recognizing them and drawing them out.

If we are, indeed, to give a credible account of our faith and our hope, in the spirit of "gentleness and reverence," as the First Letter of Peter puts it (3:15-16), then a new Catholic apologetics must disavow triumphalism in whatever form and respect the integrity and good will of its conversation partners.

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

The *Catholic Courier* provides space for readers to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome original, signed letters about current issues affecting church life.

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