

# When does religious illiteracy matter?

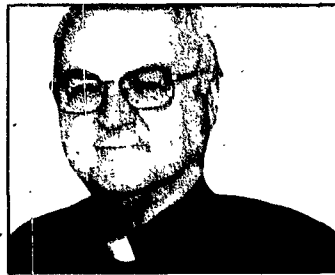
Surveys have consistently shown that, since the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Catholics under the age of 50 know less about the content of their faith tradition than did their pre-Vatican II counterparts.

The question is: What difference does it make? What difference does it make, for example, if an under-50 Catholic today cannot distinguish between the Immaculate Conception and the virginal conception?

While it is surely better to know than not to know, such information is hardly essential to a fully conscious Catholic life. In other areas, however, religious illiteracy is more serious because it can undermine one's sense of religious identity, not only as a member of the Catholic Church but, more fundamentally, as a Christian.

Staying with the Marian example above, it may not be a matter of overriding importance that a Catholic know the difference between the Immaculate Conception (of Mary) and the virginal conception (of Jesus), but it surely is of the highest importance that Catholics know that their church does not approve of, much less promote, the "worship" of Mary, as if she somehow shared in the divinity of her Son.

As in many things, however, it is better to know too lit-



Father Richard McBrien

## Essays in Theology

tle than to claim to know too much. Thus, in the realm of Marian devotion, there are many Catholics for whom Mary is a virtual cipher. They never advert to her, much less seek her intercession through prayer.

On the other hand, there are Catholics for whom Mary shares almost equal spiritual billing with her Son.

The religiously illiterate Catholic may not know the difference between the Immaculate Conception and the virginal conception, but that same Catholic knows instinctively that if we have been redeemed, it is Jesus Christ who redeemed us, not his mother.

Is sin a part of the total picture? Of course, it is. Can sin derail our progress toward salvation? Of course, it can.

In the Catholic faith tradition, based on the preaching of Jesus himself and of his Apostles, "where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (Romans 5:20).

The power of God's grace is always stronger than the power of sin.

The fundamental message of the Gospel, therefore, is not that the world and all of us with it are teetering on the brink of damnation, but that the whole of God's creation is destined for glory (Romans 8:18-25).

In an article in the current issue of Celebration magazine, Tom Beaudoin, a visiting assistant professor of theology at Boston College and a widely published commentator on the faith of younger Catholics like himself, distinguishes between "conceptual literacy" and "performative literacy," that is, between "knowing" what one is to believe as a Catholic and actually "doing" what is consistent with Catholicism's core beliefs.

Beaudoin regards this performative literacy as "a major success story" for post-Vatican II religious education, expressed in the practice of volunteerism, social justice, ecumenism and lay responsibility for the church.

In the end, it is not the one who says, "Lord, Lord" who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who actually does the will of God (Matthew 7:21).

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

## Can church push reform of homes?

To the editor:

I am writing in response to a previous letter regarding the reform of nursing home conditions, which mentioned a report by the General Accounting Office on the shortage of experienced surveyors and backlog of complaints.

In early spring of 2001 our local newspaper ran an article by the New York state health commissioner. It said our governor was proposing the New York state Quality Health Improvement Act and providing 550 million dollars for auditors and help to recruit, retain and train health-care workers.

Having recently spent a rehabilitation period in a nursing home, I was appalled at the lack of care provided and the deplorable attitudes of many personnel.

As for the "daily care" time provided, it was far below three hours.

The "quality care" that is frequently stressed in nursing home brochures and interviews with prospective patients has to be more clearly defined and assured.

We must try to empathize with nursing home residents — how it must feel to be moving, in many cases, to their "last home," to giving up their "control of their lifestyle," and being exposed to the care of

strangers and their apathy.

Since the various agencies, offices, and commissions seem to be failing in their functions, why can't the Catholic Church — and isn't it — play an active role in promoting nursing home reforms? We spend time and money on social activities, restorations etc., but often overlook or avoid our responsibility to the elderly — our brothers and sisters.

Mrs. I. G. Tolbert  
Union Street  
Newark

## Thanks to all for assisting West Town

To the editor:

This community's response to the terrible fire at West Town Village has moved and heartened the residents of West Town and its manager, Providence Housing Development Corporation. We owe debts of gratitude to the many, many people who came to the aid of the residents of West Town during and after the fire. They are too numerous to name individually, but include: the Henrietta firefighters and emergency technicians who responded to the fire, ensuring that there were no serious casualties; the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Team that helped the residents with emergency housing, medicine and other necessities; the Catholic parishes, J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation and others who have responded to the fire with generous contributions to help the residents rebuild their lives; and those others who helped residents with moving and packing and provided other support during the weeks following the fire, including management, staff and volunteers from the following organizations:

Catholic Charities; Catholic Family Center Eldersource; Diamond Packaging; Henrietta Senior Community Center; LeCesse Construction; Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Rochester; Pizza Corner; Pizza Hut in Henrietta;

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