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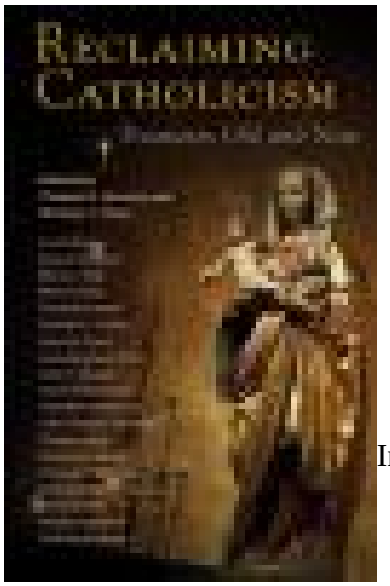
Reclaiming Catholicism

Richard McBrien | Mar. 1, 2010 Essays in Theology

There is a new book out, entitled *Reclaiming Catholicism* (Orbis Books) and edited by my friend and former colleague at Boston College, Thomas Groome, chair of its Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, and by Michael Daley, religion teacher at St. Xavier High in Cincinnati.

Perhaps the book will help younger Catholics to better understand and appreciate Catholicism?s roots in the pre-Vatican II era, and older Catholics to recall the spiritual assets that contributed to their own religious formation.



Individual books, however, usually have limited impact, and I suspect that *Reclaiming Catholicism* will be no exception.

Nevertheless, one hopes that younger and older Catholics alike will find something of value in this one.

A sampling of the contributors and their entries yields such a hope: ?Studying the Bible, Then and Now,? by Sr. Diane Bergant, C.S.A.; ?The Humbling of the Priesthood,? by Fr. Donald Cozzens; ?The Pre-Vatican II Church and Women,? by Susan Ross; and ?Sin: ?Don?t Lose All That Old-Time Catholic Guilt,?? by Fr. Charles Curran.

There are also entries on major Catholic personalities of the pre-Vatican II period: John Courtney Murray, S.J., Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., Thomas Merton, Archbishop Fulton Sheen, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, Mary Perkins Ryan, Sr. Marie Augusta Neal, S.N.D., Dorothy Day, Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., and Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C., who, like some others, straddles both sides of the conciliar divide.

There are also entries on the Baltimore Catechism, Catholic schools, contraception, Confession, the Rosary, and even the Legion of Decency.

Full disclosure: I contributed two entries to the collection. The first is on the church, before and after Vatican II,

and the second is on Fr. Hesburgh, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame, where I continue to teach.

I believe that the book?s appearance is timely, if for no other reason than that it might prove helpful to Catholics who are currently discouraged and demoralized about the state of their church.

By way of example, I received two e-mails in the past few days alone that reflect the pain suffered needlessly by so many good Catholics. I say ?needlessly? because, with a higher quality of leadership, especially at the episcopal level, many of the church?s problems would not exist.

A few weeks ago, prompted by the newly-released film ?Invictus,? this column pointed [1] to the example of Nelson Mandela, elected to the presidency of South Africa after spending the greater part of 27 years as a political prisoner in that country.

Rather than seize the opportunity to ?get even? with his long-time tormentors in the Afrikaner-dominated government, Mandela used the reins of power to heal his nation?s divisions and bring whites and blacks together.

That is the challenge of real leadership: to unite rather than to divide, to make a fractured country into a community.

It only requires a short step to apply the lessons of Mandela?s leadership in South Africa to papal and episcopal leadership in the Catholic church.

Enlightened leadership was exercised in the relatively brief pontificate of John XXIII, and it was also exercised by so many of the bishops of the same time and since: Bernard Alfrink of The Netherlands, Leo-Jozef Suenens of Belgium, Joseph Bernardin of Chicago?to cite only three examples.

Why did the high promise of the Second Vatican Council give way to the doldrums experienced by so many active and committed Catholics today?

One e-mail correspondent informed me that he had resigned from his parish council and that he and his wife had decided to leave the parish to which they had belonged for many years to take up membership in a downtown parish effectively staffed by a religious community.

When my correspondent lectored for the last time at his long-time parish, his judgment, he said, was confirmed. The new associate pastor preached what my correspondent considered a divisive homily that derided the religious education of the past 30-40 years and denounced what he called ?cafeteria? Catholics.

It was, in the judgment of this demoralized Catholic, ?a poorly veiled condemnation of Vatican II.? It was something to which he wanted to be subjected no longer.

The second e-mail came from a fellow priest, who was appalled by a statement attributed to one of our bishops as he joined other bishops in opposing same-sex civil unions legislation.

The bishop asserted that ?not all discrimination is unjust. Some is quite justified because it is based on reality and truth??namely, that gays and lesbians are nothing more than perverts, who deserve no protection from the law?

If Nelson Mandela had followed the example of some of our priests and bishops, one wonders where South Africa would be today.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/what-effective-leadership-looks