

"The Resurrection of the Dead–II"

Week of May 9, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Last week's column, on the resurrection of the dead, was supposed to make reference to the deaths of some of my fellow priests in the Archdiocese of Hartford, but I ran out of space.

I am writing this sequel on Holy Thursday. Easter is very much on my mind. And so is Bill Maher's appearance last Sunday at a local theater here in South Bend, IN.

Maher took predictable, but well-aimed, swipes at religion in general, and at Catholicism in particular. He had been raised Catholic, but is now an atheist.

Included among his repertoire was a critical comment about Christianity's apparent certitude regarding the existence of heaven and hell, and life everlasting generally.

The latter jibe struck home because a few days earlier I had completed my column on the creedal affirmation of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

I referred to that belief as a central tenet of Christian faith, and so it is. But it is also something that we Christians take on faith. It is not based on scientific evidence.

In other words, we could be wrong about this belief, as we could be wrong about the Resurrection of Christ, which is the basis of our belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Religious people do not like to be told that they cannot claim certitude for their beliefs. While faith does accord a certain kind of *religious* certitude, it is not *human* certitude in the sense that we conventionally understand the concept.

Thus, when a person dies, we often say, to comfort the bereaved, that the individual is now reunited with a spouse, for example, who preceded her or him in death.

But do we have any basis, apart from our faith, to say such a thing? Faith may be sufficient for people who are religious, but we need to realize--and admit to ourselves, if not to others--that we do not really know whether our words correspond to reality.

Critics like Bill Maher do not believe that this affirmation of faith is based in reality, which is why he is now an atheist. He does not disparage people of faith, as other atheists do, only those who are too sure of themselves and look down their noses at those who do not share their beliefs.

Why is it, for example, that an avowed atheist could not run for President of the United States, much less win? Americans expect their presidential candidates to disclose their faith-credentials, including those who have been married three times!

Comedians like Bill Maher love to tweak such people for their hypocrisy. And he is right to do so because every person of faith is vulnerable to that charge in one way or another.

People of faith need to acknowledge (a) that they could be wrong, even as they firmly believe in the tenets of their religion; and (b) that they respect those who do not share their faith, even agnostics and atheists, like Bill Maher.

In the days leading up to the great feast of Easter, Christians reaffirmed their faith in the resurrection of the dead.

But they could do so while at the same time being open to the possibility (not the probability) that they could be wrong, and that the critics could be right.

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) wrote extensively about atheism (nn. 19-21), not to condemn it but to better understand it and to challenge believers to acknowledge their own responsibility for the existence of atheism today (n. 19).

"What does the most to show God's presence clearly is the familial love of the faithful who, being all of one mind and spirit, work together for the faith of the Gospel and present themselves as a sign of unity" (n. 21).

My fellow diocesans who died in recent months prompt some of us to reaffirm our faith in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come: Fathers Bernard Killeen, who was a young curate (associate pastor) in my home parish of St. Justin in Hartford, CT; William Brenza, who attended the same seminary as I did in the Brighton section of Boston; William Mullen, who was Archbishop Henry J. O'Brien's faithful and able secretary; Thomas Farrell, who was one of my teachers at St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield; and John Stack, a professor of Theology at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford.

May their example continue to inspire us to live a truly Christian life and, like them, to share in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, may we live by what we say we believe.

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"The Teaching Authority of Bishops"
 Week of May 16, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The action taken by the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine, condemning Sister Elizabeth Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God*, for its alleged lack of orthodoxy, has provoked a storm of criticism, especially from the two main organizations of Catholic theologians, the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) and the College Theology Society, as well as from Sister Johnson's own religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph.

These reactions seem to have caught the committee's chairman, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., by surprise. In any case, Cardinal Wuerl sent a 13-page letter to all of the U.S. bishops on their teaching authority.

In that letter Cardinal Wuerl took issue with the 10-member board of the CTSA, accusing it of misreading "the legitimate and apostolic role of bishops in addressing the right relationship of theologians and bishops" (p. 1, para. 2).

Bishops alone, like referees and umpires in sports, have the final word. What Cardinal Wuerl failed to point out is that umpires and referees sometimes make bad calls, which in some sports are embarrassingly disclosed via instant replays or in post-play comments by the announcers.

Cardinal Wuerl's letter made much of the fact that bishops are "authentic" teachers, as if the word authentic were synonymous with genuine.

On the contrary, an "authentic" teaching is simply one that is given by a bishop or body of bishops who teach in the name of the Church by reason of their episcopal office.

This does not mean that the bishops are somehow above the Word of God. They must listen to it, guard it, and explain it faithfully, with the help of the Holy Spirit (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, n. 1).

At a broader official level still, the magisterium is the teaching authority inherent in and exercised by the hierarchy and theologians alike. It is known by some as the double magisterium and is rooted in both episcopal ordination (thus, the magisterium of the cathedral chair) and theological competence (the magisterium of the professorial chair).

Significantly, this distinction, based in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas (the *Quodlibetales* 3.4.1 *ad* 3), was retrieved by the late Cardinal Avery Dulles (*A Church to Believe In*, p. 109), an eminent theologian in his own right.

There is an even broader meaning of teaching authority in the Church, namely, the teaching authority inherent in and exercised by every member of the Church. It is known simply as the magisterium of the whole Church, the *Ecclesia docens* ("the teaching Church"), and is rooted in Baptism.

In the past, the term *Ecclesia docens* was limited to the hierarchy, while the rest of the faithful, including theologians, were considered the *Ecclesia discens* ("the learning Church"). With Vatican II, that distinction disappeared.

This is far different from Cardinal Wuerl's letter, which limits the laity to *applying* the teaching of the bishops (p. 3, para. 1).

Cardinal Wuerl also took issue with the criticism that the Committee on Doctrine had not followed the bishops' own procedural rules, adopted in 1989, which required the committee to speak with Sister Johnson (or any other theologian under review) before releasing its condemnation of her book.

Cardinal Wuerl responded by saying that those rules were only "one way of proceeding," and should not be seen as "obligatory" (p. 12, para. 1).

Sister Johnson, it must be added, teaches at Fordham University, which is located in New York City, the heart of the Archdiocese of New York. Was the Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, who also happens to be President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, consulted before the condemnation was released?

If not, why not? Nothing in the rules say explicitly that the local bishop should be consulted before any action is taken against a theologian in his diocese, but it would be a grave lapse in episcopal protocol if he were not given a "head's-up."

I am posing this only as a question. However, no lawyer (or theologian) worth his or her salt asks a question that he or she doesn't already know the answer to.

One final point: In his nomination hearings soon-to-be Chief Justice John Roberts insisted that the role of a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court is like a baseball umpire behind the plate. His function is simply to call balls and strikes.

If justices on the Court are only calling balls and strikes and not allowing their personal preferences to affect their judgment, why, then, are there so many 5-4 decisions, and why do the justices divide so frequently along ideological lines?

The same questions could be asked of the bishops.

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