

"Thanksgiving, 2011 – II"
Week of November 21, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

As Catholic institutions, especially schools, multiplied rapidly in the 1950s, Pope Pius XII urged religious superiors to begin the modernization of their congregations. He mentioned specifically the abolition of outmoded customs, the modification of habits, and increased attention to the professional education of sisters.

At the subsequent ecumenical council convened by Pius XII's successor, John XXIII, Cardinal Leo-Jozef Suenens, primate of Belgium, vigorously promoted the renewal of women's religious life.

Consequently, Vatican II urged religious communities to return to their biblical roots and their founding charisms, and to develop a greater measure of engagement with the modern world.

Women religious, however, responded with more energy, creativity, and enthusiasm than church officials anticipated, to the chagrin of more traditional nuns and ultra-conservative Catholics generally—the very type of both constituencies that applauded, and even instigated, the recent investigation of U.S. sisters and of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Life within religious communities of women began to change dramatically. The first indication came with the busloads of nuns, still in full traditional habits, who came out at night to hear theologians and biblical scholars explain the principal teachings of the just-concluded Second Vatican Council.

Such was their hunger for the theology and biblical scholarship that had permeated the council.

This sense of what Vatican II had accomplished was in striking contrast to the knowledge of bishops who came home to read back issues of their diocesan papers in order to review the news of the council and before facing their local newspaper reporters.

The sisters' awareness was also in contrast to that of priests, who would have been recognizable in their Roman collars, and who stayed away from these lectures because they didn't want to admit, to others and perhaps to themselves, that they had anything more to learn about the Church and its theology. Their years in the seminary had been more than adequate—or so they assumed.

But attending evening lectures was only the beginning for the sisters. They abandoned completely their outmoded customs. They changed their habits more radically than expected, although by today's standards not so markedly. And they signed up for theology and biblical courses now being offered in Catholic universities, especially, but not exclusively, in the summer.

Soon the sisters were better educated theologically and biblically than were many of the priests, who became more defensive about their status, particularly with the new emphasis on the role of the laity.

In a period of "barely 40 years," Sister Sandra Schneiders wrote in her *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) article of October 2, 2009, "they fairly well bridged the historical gap between their early modern European origins and postmodern American ecclesial and cultural reality."

Some Catholics were taken aback by what they interpreted as the speed of the renewal, but in actuality, Sandra Schneiders pointed out, the development of non-monastic ministerial religious life for women had been slowly underway for nearly four centuries.

The council had mandated a renewal for virtually all religious congregations, including the revision of their constitutions. In that regard, I can recall encouraging my graduate students who were members of religious communities to make their final research papers a comparative ecclesiological study of their communities' old and new constitutions.

Where these old constitutions had placed primary emphasis on the monastic side of religious life and only secondarily on the ministerial, the revised constitutions defined religious life as having "a

single, integrated end.”

But the most immediately visible change, though hardly the most important, was in the habit. After a period of experimentation, most renewed congregations successfully made the transition to simple contemporary dress appropriate to their quite varied ministerial lives.

Many older priests and sisters today look askance at some of the recently ordained and professed because their preference for traditional dress seems to mask a preference for an unrenewed religious and clerical life, as existed prior to Vatican II and even prior to their own births!

“If the habit was the emotional flash point of renewal,” Sister Sandra Schneiders wrote in her NCR article, “the broadening and full commitment to ministry” was the “spiritual substance at the heart of renewal.”

I would repeat here the concluding words of my Thanksgiving column in 2009: “We should not trust the judgment of anyone for whom the habit issue is more important than the issue of ministry.”

And I would also repeat the words with which I ended last week’s Thanksgiving column: “We can never tire of singing [the sisters’] praises—in thanksgiving for all that they have done, and continue to do, for the People of God.”

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"Advent, 2011"
 Week of November 28, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

I don't know how the new, literal translation of the Mass, which went into effect on the First Sunday of Advent, was received by Catholics earlier this week.

However, even if everything went smoothly in most parishes, Catholics, and especially pastors, had a right to complain about the high cost of purchasing new missals and other liturgical books.

The only ones happy are the publishers who stand to make a lot of money and those traditionalist Catholics, inside and outside the hierarchy, who applaud the so-called "reform of the reform."

I hope to write about the general reaction of regular Mass-goers in some future week. This week's column, however, is devoted to the season of Advent itself.

The First Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year, but I doubt if any Catholics greeted one another with a "Happy New Year" last Sunday. New Year's Day for most Americans (and I include Canadians in that term) falls on January 1st.

Incidentally, when the Church followed the Julian calendar before 1582, New Year's Day was celebrated on March 25th, the feast of the Annunciation.

For Chinese and other Asian communities, New Year's Day follows the Lunar Year and falls somewhere between January 10th and February 19th. In 2012 the Lunar Year begins on Monday, January 23rd.

The Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) is also a movable holiday, observed sometime in late September or early October. This past fall it was celebrated beginning at sundown on Wednesday, September 28th.

The Church's First Sunday of Advent usually occurs in late November, as it did again this year, but it could fall as late as December 3rd. "When that happens, as it did in 2006, the Fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Eve."

Advent, as this column pointed out in 2006 and again in 2009, has never had the same spiritual drawing-power as its sister season of Lent. But both seasons are supposed to provide a period of spiritual preparation for major feasts: Christmas and Easter respectively.

The word "Advent" is derived from Latin (*adveniens*, or *adventus*), signifying "a coming toward (or near)". It is meant to focus the Church's attention on the three comings of Christ: in the past, at his birth in Bethlehem; in the present, in the community that is especially gathered for the Eucharist; and in the future, at his Second Coming.

Catholics have no problem understanding the first two comings, but the third continues to have an air of unreality about it. Unfortunately, most Catholics focus their attention on the first coming at Christmas. Traditional carols underscore that connection.

However, those who preach during Advent should point out to congregations that the coming of Christ in the present is the most spiritually engaging of his three comings.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy declared that when Catholics gather for the Eucharist, Christ becomes present in the worshiping community itself, in the Word that is proclaimed by the readers and the priest, in the persons of the various ministers, and uniquely in the sacrament of Holy Communion (n. 7).

Christ also comes to us in the present apart from the Eucharist itself, through what this column once referred to as "the stable door of ordinary human experience."

We are reminded of this again and again in the series of questions posed to Jesus in the parable

of the sheep and the goats: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...? (Matthew 25:37).

Both the righteous (the sheep) and the unrighteous (the goats) will ask him on the day of judgment how they were to have known when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison.

“Truly I tell you,” he will reply, “just as you did it [or did not do it] to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it [or did not do it] to me” (vv. 40, 45).

As this column previously declared, “The message of Advent is that the blessings of the Kingdom will ‘come toward’ us only to the extent that we ‘come toward’ those most in need of our love and support.”

In other words, Advent is a time for redirecting the expectation of Christ’s coming away from “out there” to “right here.”

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