

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD
MARCELLINO D'AMBROSIO

Roll out the red carpet

When he visited Nazareth, Jesus received cool welcome and little faith from his neighbors



For the last two Sundays, the Gospel of Mark has been making it abundantly clear that Jesus is indeed God almighty, ruler of the world and Lord over life and death.

But this week we come to a story that leaves us scratching our heads.

Jesus goes to his native place and receives a less than jubilant reception. They found him too much for them. That may not be so surprising to those of us accustomed to family life. But what does come as a shock are these words: "So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there ... He was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mk 6:5-6).

Wait a minute. If Jesus is God, then isn't the omnipotent? Wouldn't it be admitting that he is not God to say that he was unable to work miracles in a given place?

Hardly. God exercises his power only in a way befitting his nature. God is a lover. He seeks to give his love to those who freely accept it and open their hearts to him. He refuses to violate the wishes of those who he has created in his image and likeness, who possess intellect and free will. He directly controls the wind and the waves through a simple command, for wind and waves are inanimate forces. But with human beings, he makes himself available and waits for an invitation. The invitation where we ask him to come into our lives and calm our interior storms is called faith.

Faith is not, therefore, an emotion. It is not about an inner assurance, a feeling of confidence that is free of all shadow of doubt or fear. Rather, it is a decision, sometimes made with knees knocking.

Faith is a "yes" that gives God permission to work in our lives and rearrange the furniture if he so chooses. That means blessing, healing, salvation and miracles.

But it also means yielding to his will, his plan and his timetable.

And of course, that is the part we don't like. What will others think of me? Will I still be able to spend Saturday nights the way I've always spent them? I work hard for a living and deserve to be able to blow off some steam! Will I still be able to hang out with Joe, to live with Mary if I invite God into my life and follow his way.

Sometimes we are not really happy with the way things are, but at least they are familiar. We know what to expect. We are in control, or at least we think we are. Faith means handing over control, and that scares us. We are free to say no, and quite frankly we often do. Sometimes we say no in small ways — we only let God take us so far. Sometimes it's a very firm "no" that shuts God completely out of our lives.

This is the sort of "no" that Jesus encountered during his visit to Nazareth and which the prophets before him often encountered from the people of Israel.

So, if Jesus was divine and therefore all knowing, why did he bother to go to Nazareth at all? For the same reason that God sent Ezekiel to the Israelites and told him in advance that they'd resist. The Lord wanted to take away all excuses.

God loved his people enough to offer them every opportunity for the healing and deliverance that they prayed for. He called their bluff, so to speak. Jerusalem pleaded for deliverance from the Babylonians and the people of Nazareth probably prayed for healing for Uncle Jacob or food for the town's orphans. But in both cases when God showed up, ready to pour out his gifts, they didn't like the packaging and rejected the terms.

At the last judgment, when our lives flash before our eyes, we'll be reminded of the times God made a house call and we slammed the door in his face. I say it's time to apologize, unbolt the door and roll out the red carpet.

Marcellino D'Ambrosio is the director of crossroads-initiative.com. He writes from Texas.

MEDIA

Plug into the Catholic truth

Podcasting, dubbed 'the new medium for the new evangelization,' is catching on rapidly as a teaching and evangelizing tool for the faith

By Gail Besse

If millions of people are tuning into personal audio players, what's a smart way to share the faith with them?

These digital devices bridge time and space. MP3 players can transmit stories that unleash truth, open hearts and touch souls with grace, according to some enthusiastic media-savvy Catholics. The tiny players are already popular from grade schools to boardrooms. Even Pope Benedict XVI has an iPod Nano.

Music isn't all they're hearing. Short radiolike shows called podcasts are pulling in listeners, too.

"Podcasts are the new medium for the new evangelization. Anyone can be a broadcaster," said Carlos Briceno, co-founder of Disciples with Microphones (DwM), a lay-run Catholic apostolate for podcasters. "Someone who's on a search for God could come across a recording that he never would have heard otherwise. Radio can be an artform, a theater of the mind," said Briceno, a playwright who trained with National Public Radio.

"Godcasts," shows with a religious bent, are growing in number and popularity. DwM is the biggest Catholic portal, with 37 different podcasts that can be downloaded at www.discipleswithmicrophones.org.

People like the shows' cost and content — free, infor-

mative and entertaining. You can listen directly from a computer even without an MP3 player. But mobility and space-saving are two advantages of the electronic medium. You can pack hours of listening into a device the size of a deck of cards.

Podcasts get their name from the Apple iPod, but they can be heard on any MP3 player. These players store sounds electronically as compressed audio files called MP3 files. If you subscribe to a series, new episodes are automatically delivered to your computer. You dock, or connect, the player to the computer for updates.

Even the techno-challenged can produce these shows inexpensively with just a microphone and a computer tied to the Internet.

Parish podcasts

Podcasting has been pioneered mainly by individuals, but some parishes are trying it. The Triumph of the Cross Parish in Steubenville, Ohio, has a parish-mission podcast; St. Anthony's Parish in Forest Grove, Ore., has homilies. The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in England publishes short audio and video reports.

The content of shows in the podosphere is eclectic.

Franciscan Father Stan Fortuna serves up "all da best stuff" with a Brooklyn accent from his "Digital Audio Deli." "The Broadcast" gives daily Mass readings.



Jennifer and Greg Willits call their "Rosary Army" podcast a "Catholic reality show." PHOTO BY KELLY SHEA

There are shows on youth ministry, homeschooling, apologetics and saints. You'll find "Catholic Rockers," "True Knights," Marian shows, Gospel readings and the Liturgy of the Hours. "Going Fourth" connects people in the Cursillo movement. These are just a few of the offerings.

Personal testimonies

One show that draws about 1,200 downloads a day — the equivalent of an average-size congregation — is produced by Greg and Jennifer Willits of Conyers, Ga. They began podcasting more than a year ago, working from what they call their "cloffice," or walk-in-closet office.

The couple's "Rosary Army" show started as an outgrowth of their rosary-making apostolate. "Then it became a sounding board in our lives when I lost my job," said Greg. "That's when interest increased, because people were getting a Catholic reality show."

He and Jennifer, both 35, shared how their faith helped them meet marital challenges



Tune in and download a faith message

Here is a listing of just a few available Catholic podcasts:

Disciples with Microphones: www.discipleswithmicrophones.org

Vatican Radio: www.105live.vaticanradio.org

Catholic Insider: www.sqpn.com

Rosary Army: www.rosaryarmy.com

Digital Audio Deli with Father Stan Fortuna: www.digitaudiodeli.com

Have no pod fear

Like a digital camera, an electronic sound recording has no moving parts. Content sent and stored on audio files can be erased.

To listen to a podcast, download free podcatching software from an aggregator such as Juice (juicereceiver.sourceforge.net) or iTunes (www.apple.com/itunes/).

If you sign up for an RSS feed (really simple syndication), new podcasts will be automatically downloaded to your computer. You can listen there or "sync" (synchronize/send) these files to an iPod or other MP3 player.

To create a podcast, plug a USB headset with earphone and microphone (\$50-\$100) into your computer. Download Audacity, a free audio-recording program (audacity.sourceforge.net/). Record and edit, adding other voices, sound effects or ambient music. The sound will appear as waves on the screen. Follow the program's instructions to save the recording as an MP3 or compressed audio file.

Then, like putting books on a shelf, you can store files at a rental space where listeners retrieve them. Podcasters recommend www.Libsyn.com, a media-distribution service that charges from \$5 to \$30 monthly.



such as selling a house, facing illness, raising four boys and grieving their unborn baby's death. The couple said they also benefit from their listeners.

"We were covered in grace because so many people prayed for us," Greg said.

"Podcasts put a personal touch on the Catholic faith. People can relate to us," he added. "You don't have to shove the faith down people's throats. They'll get it."

Priestly performances

One listener is Gene Yang, a Catholic high school teacher in Oakland, Calif. "It really gets under your skin. There's an intimacy that doesn't exist in commercial radio," he said of podcasts.

Yang also subscribes to "Daily Breakfast," a 20-minute mix of music, news, popular culture and inspiration.

It's produced Father Roderick Vonhogen, a 38-year-old Dutch priest who is fluent in English and trained in broadcast media. His show opens with an alarm buzzing and snappy banjo music, then he weaves in catechesis.

The versatile priest began podcasting in February 2005, six months after "the podfather" Adam Curry, a former MTV video jockey, is said to have produced the first show. Now Father Roderick's Star Quest Podcast Network (SQPN) hosts eight different shows.

His podcasts regularly rank among the top 10 chosen monthly on Podcast Alley, a website that ranks 19,000 podcasts from various categories. Among the SQPN lineup is "Hands and Feet," a fun, free-wheeling and faithful look at Catholicism peppered with

sound effects and music for teenagers.

He also produces "Catholic Insider," an audio tour of Europe where listeners learn about Catholic faith and culture. Father Roderick's insider reports from Rome during Pope John Paul II's last days took listeners among the crowd in St. Peter's Square.

Weeks before that, the newly formed DwM began "Podcasts for Terri" with reports from Florida on Terri Schiavo's last days. Briceno, who produced the podcasts, recalled being able to report on the developments of Schiavo's case daily and on the people who gathered outside the hospice.

"One man drove from Missouri to be there outside the Florida hospice in prayer. Every day he beat a plastic drum," Briceno said. The drumbeat can be heard on DwM's podcast.

Teaching new media

Accessibility, like that provided by "Podcasts for Terri" and "Catholic Insider," is a key advantage to podcasting, said James Coyle, a communications professor at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Coyle advises students on three university-affiliated podcasts.

The digital medium is a gift for the pro-life and Catholic message, Coyle said. "You can reach an audience without having to go through the traditional gatekeepers of the media."

Both audio and video podcasting will be taught at John Paul the Great University in San Diego, slated to open this fall with studies in business, media and technology. But the focus will be on making the shows' content come alive, according to President Derry Connolly.

"Most kids have iPods, and they're already podcast-literate. The bigger challenge is to make a story compelling, which has big implications for evangelization," he said.

The podcast-literate are well aware of the iTunes directory, which lists thousands of Christian offerings. DwM and SQPN are good Catholic portals to start exploring, but there are also smaller ones like Catholic Exchange, which offers podcasts by writer Mark Shea and radio personality John Morales.

Eternal Word Television Network and some Catholic radio stations are now trying limited podcasts. Vatican Radio, the broadcasting station of the Holy See offers its own 30-minute podcast.

Sharing the message

Since the beginning of the Church, Catholics have used the latest media to spread the Good News of Christ. Podcasting is just another form of communication Catholics can use to evangelize each other and the public.

Everyone's baptismal call is to evangelize, Briceno said, and his group wants to teach others how to share their love for Jesus. One of DwM missions is to teach Catholics to produce professional-quality podcasts as part of the new evangelization called for by Pope John II.

"My strength is just casting out the net," Briceno said.

"The most important thing is to pray. Ask what the Lord wants you to do. Use the gifts God blessed you with to tell that story."

Gail Besse writes from Massachusetts.

PASTORAL ANSWERS MSGR. M. FRANCIS MANNION

Other faiths' confession

Some Christian denominations have a rite similar to the Sacrament of Reconciliation



Question: A Protestant friend told me that there is confession in her church. How many non-Catholic churches have confession?

— B.D.
Wilmington, N.C.

Answer: Though the term "sacrament" is usually not applied to the rite, there is something approaching confession, or the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in many non-Catholic churches. There has always been a form of confession in Eastern Orthodoxy, though it has varied from place to place. An Orthodox Christian may choose someone as a spiritual guide. This may be a priest or a layperson. This person becomes a spiritual father or mother and guides the individual in the Christian life. After one has confessed one's sins — either to a layperson or a priest — a form of absolution is pronounced by a priest.

In Anglicanism (including the Episcopal Church in the United States), a form of communal penance is provided for the beginning of the celebration of the eucharist. This is completed by a profession of general absolution. The revised form of the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church, their main liturgical prayer book, has a more formal rite of confession than was present in the older liturgies.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America also has a form of confession. Confession is one of the rites that Martin Luther retained when he revised the liturgy of the medieval church for the use of the Reformers. Various forms of confession have been used by Lutherans over the centuries, though they have varied from country to country. The revised book of worship used by mainstream Lutherans in the United States has a form of confession in which the penitent confesses to a minister and receives a declaration of pardon.

While the churches just mentioned have a form of confession, these are in the minority. Most Protestant denominations believe

that no intermediary is necessary between a Christian and God in order to be absolved from sin. Protestants of this persuasion confess their sins in private before God, believing that this suffices to gain divine pardon.

Displaying the flag

Question: In our renovated church building, the American flag has not been put back. I am told that the pastor did not like the flag in church. Where did the tradition of putting the flag in church come from? Has any recent Church law changed the rules about this?

— Name and address withheld

Answer: The practice of placing the American flag in churches originated during World War II and was meant to draw attention to the necessity of praying for those who were serving overseas in the armed forces during that conflict. Flags were often accompanied by books of remembrance in which were listed the names of soldiers who had died.

Flags and books of remembrance were also used during the Korean and Vietnam wars, and many churches have some similar mode of remembrance for the Iraq war.

There are no official Church rules about the display of flags in churches. The U.S. bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (BCL) suggests that the national flag not be placed in the sanctuary in order to maintain the prominence of the principal liturgical items and to keep focus on the central mystery of faith. The BCL suggests that the flag be placed in some other part of the church.

Many churches place flags in the vestibule or in some other shrinelike area where the dead of foreign wars are remembered. As in many such matters, the decision is left up to the diocesan bishop or the pastor.

Msgr. M. Francis Mannion is a priest and theologian of the Diocese of Salt Lake City. Send your questions to Pastoral Answers, Our Sunday Visitor, 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750 or to mfmannion@osv.com. Letters must be signed, but anonymity may be requested.