

Introduction

The theme of this issue, "Ministry and Popular Culture," presses us to examine not just what popular culture means but the strange ways in which we use these words. Webster's dictionary lists eleven definitions of the word "culture." The first three definitions suggest artistic and intellectual pursuits; a quality of enlightenment or refinement in what is excellent in the arts and letters. This seems to suggest that people who are "cultural" are high-brow. Add the adjective "popular" and you are faced with an oxymoron. After all, when we think of something being "popular" we refer to that which appeals to the people at large, not some enlightened few.

Each of the authors of this issue's articles unravels the oxymoron by reminding us that ministry is about people in the concrete circumstances of life. There are some features in our culture that challenge today's minister, e.g., the pluralistic, individualistic, relativistic values noted by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in *Habits of the Heart*. There are other features that should encourage us as ministers, e.g., the popular interest in ecology, spirituality, religiosity. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* was "pastoral" because it urged us not to engage a culture's habits of the heart with the bias of theological dualism but with both the balm and challenge of the Gospel. "At times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in light of the gospel if it is to carry out its task (4).

Liturgical scholar Kevin W. Irwin of The Catholic University of America demonstrates how what the liturgy says and does contributes to a more profound understanding of the two interests in our popular culture, spirituality and ecology. Michael H. Crosby, O.F.M., Cap., an astute interpreter of the social concerns of our culture, challenges the consumerism of our times and offers as an effective antidote a look at alternative communities of resistance and compassion such as the group called "Alternatives for Simple Living." Guerric DeBona, O.S.B., who teaches homiletics at St. Meinrad's School of Theology, traces the history of how Jesus has been represented on the silver screen. He deftly shows how film's images of the Savior may be heavily influenced by our formative habits as consumers in late capitalism.

It should be noted that a recent Roman document focused on the subject of popular culture: "Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture" (1999). While the document contains many fine sentiments and helpful instructions, Anthony J. Gittins, C.S.Sp., professor of missiology at Catholic Theological Union, writes that it "simply overlooks some of the

4 Introduction

most brute social facts of our times, and a very significant minority of the population.” From his own ministry with homeless women, Gittins poignantly cites the popular religion or popular religiosity that is alive and well in our cities. David Blanchard, O. Carm., is an anthropologist who teaches at Washington Theological Union. Drawing both on his academic expertise and his “down in the trenches” pastoral experience, Blanchard pleads for pastoral ministers to examine the blurring lines of magic and religion in today’s culture and offers practical suggestions of what to do and what not to do when faced with practices that seem exotic to us.

Our final non-thematic essay is by Kevin O’Neil, C.Ss.R., who provides an overview of the various sub-disciplines of moral theology from the perspective of the theme *communio*.

Our usual array of columns and book reviews hopefully will also help us focus on reading the signs of the times in light of the gospel. We urge you, once again, to write us with suggestions on how we can provide reflections that best suit your needs in pastoral ministry.