

The Priest in Parish Religious Education

By REV. CARL J. PFEIFER SJ
The person who has the most difficult role in parish religious education today is the parish priest.

The difficulty of his position arises from the rapid, dramatic changes that are taking place outside as well as inside the church. What is required of priests in many present day parishes differs significantly from the requirements of just a decade ago.

In many parishes up until very recent times—and in some places yet today — the parish priest was more often than not one of the best educated persons in the parish. In doctrinal and moral matters he was usually the unique and unquestioned expert. By reason of this educational background as well as his official position he was in fact the master religious educator in the parish. Respect for his opinions and obedience to his dictates was the normal response of the average parishioner. His actual superiority of knowledge about the Church's

teaching was complemented by the cultural environment of respect for clergymen and educators.

Today the culture is changing, theology is developing, and as a result the priest's role is much more ambiguous.

In a large number of parishes there are dozens of men and women with far greater educational background and experience than the priest. Even in specifically doctrinal and moral realms of Church teaching many parishioners have far more up-to-date training than their parish priest. Other members of the parish are highly skilled in communications, management, finances, and education. The world in which the parishioners live is infinitely more complex and confusing, and there is a new pluralism in the experience and understanding of the Church. There are legitimate differences as to how Catholics worship, how they view major moral issues of our time, and even how they express authentic Catholic doctrine.

Within this culture and Church the role of the priest is being rethought. An emerging understanding of the priest's role places emphasis on the biblical insight that the priest, like Christ, is basically to be the servant of the community. More specifically the priest is ordained to serve the unity of the parish community. He has the particular gift and task of community leadership.

St. Paul, like Vatican II, recognized that the whole Church shares in the one Priesthood of Christ, but that various members of the Church participate in that Priesthood in different ways. There are many gifts or charisms within any Church community, but all of them are given by the Holy Spirit for the service of the whole Body. One such gift is that of administrative leadership which involves not the taking over of all other charisms but is responsible for freeing and coordinating all the various gifts. This is the gift and role of the ordained parish priest.

What this means in practical terms is that the priest's leadership role as serving the unity of the parish involves recognizing the fact that his parishioners have various abilities that are gifts of God for the service of others. Some are expert teachers and experienced in communications arts, others have various creative talents, some have managerial skills, all have their unique experience of and insight into the meaning of being a Christian in the contemporary world. Instead of assuming responsibility for performing all these functions himself, the priest's role is to coordinate and integrate the various gifts found in his parishioners.

His leadership role of serving unity in parish religious educa-

tion naturally includes the priest's liturgical, sacramental ministry. It does not reduce his authority within the parish community but implies a new manner of exercising the legitimate authority he has in the "ministry of the Word."

Few priests have been trained for the delicate demands of this new "job description." Few parishioners have grown up with this understanding of the priest's role. The priest can only discover and exercise his role of leadership in serving parish unity in an environment of trust and understanding. In other words, the community is as responsible as the individual priest for helping him learn how to effectively exercise his leadership role in today's changing Church.

Parish Adult Education

By LAWRENCE LOSONCY

(Lawrence Losoncy is Director of the Adult Division of the Department of Education, United States Catholic Conference.)

A new trend increasingly evident in parishes is the great emphasis on adult education. In many parishes today it is not uncommon to see programs for parental involvement in religious education. This takes many forms, such as preparing children for first reception of the sacraments, sex education, parish councils and liturgical involvement.

While there are common areas, the most noticeable aspect of adult education programs is their wide variety. As a result adult religious education varies widely and reflects the individual character and identity of each parish, to the point that many parishes have written their own material, designed their own content area, and provided their own teacher training programs.

Parish sex education and liturgical education programs also vary, as do parish councils. The individual character of each parish demands different approaches to education needs and different forms of liturgical worship. Since Vatican II, many lay people have recognized the need to form a true community parish with its own individual character. Such parishes are testimonials to the fact that people understand differently, and that religious ed-

ucation involves as much learning and insight as it does teaching.

While the early concern with adult education was primarily religious education it was only after Vatican II that religious education broadened to include parish councils, family life and the parental role to any great degree. Now the movement is broadening even more to include human relations, environmental and ecological education, political education, cultural and artistic expression, social action, and a wide variety of special interests. These special interest programs assume various forms.

There are no magic formulas for a successful adult religion program, but there are some things to remember. From the experience of those who have successful adult education programs in their parishes, some basic guidelines may be set forth:

1. **Adapt:** Each program is going to be different, depending on parish needs and resources. Do not slavishly copy another parish's "success story." Be open to the needs of your own people.

2. **Be thorough and brief.** Keep your offerings "short and sweet"; adults learn quickly.

3. **Variety:** Offer options in your program; no one learns the same way.

4. **Involve as many as possible** in both the planning and evaluation of adult education.

An overlooked aspect of adult education today is evaluation. It is more honest and to the point if it is done anonymously, but it ought to be done in one way or another as a permanent, consistent aspect of the program and of each course or session.

5. **Don't measure success in quantity but in quality.** A core group of educated adults is a realistic goal for a first attempt at adult education.

6. **Use your resources.** The resources available to parishes today are nearly without limit. They include TV in addition to a wealth of published and audio-visual resources.

7. **Make provisions for special needs within your parish.** The elderly, the shut-ins, the handicapped, the retarded, all need special concern. Those with special interests or needs, such as the migrant workers, minority groups, and the poor should have special consideration.

Parish programs cannot be all of one kind, because people are not of one kind. Adult education needs to be in the service of all who need it, but especially in the service of those who want it most.

There is a great revival of Christian-concern traveling this land today, a revival which includes adult religion education. What it means for us and for the future remains to be seen. But we can be sure that something good will come of it.

The Council of Jerusalem

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, SJ

If I could talk with St. Luke for just two minutes, the first thing I would ask him would be this: "What did you do in Chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles? Did you combine two different meetings into one account? If so, was one of them a real 'council'? Was that letter in the second part of the chapter issued by the 'council' or not?"

Whether one meeting of the apostles and "the whole church" took place, or one meeting of the apostles (about circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law in general) and another meeting of apostles and others (about other observances of the Law), the matter described in Chapter 15 of the Acts has often been called the "Council of Jerusalem," a turning point in the history of the Church, the turning point of Luke's book of Acts.

It is an interesting fact that

the apostles and elders met to discuss whether the Jewish law of circumcision should be observed by all Gentile converts to Christianity, decided it need not be, and ended up imposing four other prescriptions of Jewish law on the Gentile converts: eat no food offered to idols; eat no blood; eat no strangled animal; avoid immorality.

How does that general prescription against immorality fit in? It seems odd, doesn't it, that a basic moral principle is tacked on to the three ritualistic items. In the 18th century a scholar therefore suggested that perhaps the original Greek reading was "choireta," meaning pork, rather than "porneia," meaning immorality. Other scholars have dug up interesting facts that help them to favor the reading of "pork" here. They have found that some postbiblical writings refer to prohibition of pork in the context of the apostolic decree of Acts, and that the

Koran contains a fourfold interdiction parallel to that of Acts but with prohibition of pork in place of porneia.

However, most scholars still hold that porneia, or immorality, is indeed the right reading here.

I have always thought that the decree requiring these things of Gentile converts of Christianity must have fallen between two stools, as the British say.

The lovers of Mosaic Law among the Christians must have regarded the decree as wholesale abandonment of a sacred tradition. Those at the other extreme, like Stephen's followers, for example, must have recognized the decree as an unacceptable compromise, and the rest of the Christians, that ever-growing group of Gentile converts, probably regarded the first three items forbidden by the decree as simply practices to avoid when socializing with their Jewish brethren. Do you agree?

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. Whenever I've discussed the Pentecostal movement with Catholic theologians, they seem little interested in it. Some dismiss it entirely. Isn't the Church ignoring a great work of the Holy Spirit? Shouldn't we be encouraging people to affiliate with this movement?

A. Catholic Pentecostalism is a relatively new phenomenon in the Catholic Church. It became a unified movement in February, 1967, at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. From there it spread to the University of Notre Dame, the Newman Center of Michigan, and then to several other places throughout the country. However, its main concentration has been in the Midwest.

The apparent lack of interest on the part of Catholic theologians might be attributed to the novelty of the movement and to the scarcity of research data.

The most serious study of Catholic Pentecostalism (also referred to as "charismatic renewal") has been done by Father Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Collegeville, Minnesota. A summary of his findings are available in the winter, 1970, issue of *Dialog* magazine (pp. 35-54) and are reprinted in pamphlet form (*Catholic Pentecostalism: Problems in Evaluation*, by Dove Publications, Pecos, New Mexico 87552).

A committee of the Catholic bishops of the United States recently made a special study of the movement, issuing a brief report at the Washington meeting of the American bishops in November, 1969. The tone of the report was cautiously positive: "It seems to be too soon to draw definitive conclusions regarding the phenomenon and more scholarly research is needed. . . . It must be admitted that theologically the movement has legitimate reasons for existence. . . . Perhaps our most prudent way to judge the validity of the claims of the Pentecostal Movement is to observe the effects on those who participate in the prayer meetings. . . . It is the conclusion of the committee on doctrine that the movement should at this point not be inhibited but allowed to develop. . . . We must be on guard that they avoid the mistakes of classic Pentecostalism. It must be recognized that in our culture there is a tendency to substitute religious experience for religious doctrine."

Among the "mistakes of classic Pentecostalism" are: anti-intellectualism, a fundamentalist interpretation of Sacred Scripture, a tendency toward emotionalism, and an indifference to the social and political dimensions of Christian responsibility. Defenders of Catholic Pentecostalism, such as Father Edward D. O'Connor, C.S.C., of the University of Notre Dame, insist that such defects do not characterize the contemporary "charismatic renewal" within the Catholic Church, although he would admit that each of these defects can be found here and there throughout the movement.

Q. The recent capture of Father Daniel Berrigan after many weeks as a fugitive from justice raises a question in my mind: Has there been a change in Catholic moral theology to the effect that civil disobedience has become acceptable Christian behavior? Are his actions heroic or scandalous?

A. In its Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, the Second Vatican Council argued that bishops have a responsibility to "advocate obedience to just laws and reverence for legitimately constituted authority" (n. 19).

It is precisely the justice and legitimacy of the American political system which Father Berrigan and others have called into question, because of this country's extended involvement in military operations in Vietnam. If he is right in his assessment of these political realities, his actions — by hindsight at least — will appear to have been prophetic in the classical sense. If he is wrong, then he is open to the charge (which some have already made) of arrogance and self-righteous moralism.

I happen to support the prophetic thesis. Others may legitimately disagree. I don't think the council or contemporary moral theology offer any clear-cut guidance on this issue. It is a matter of prudential judgment fashioned, presumably, out of the context of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.