

Family Life, Abortion, Race, Education

Through the Eyes of a Mormon Bishop

By JOHN DASH

Hanging over Bishop Martin J. Siebach's desk is a large photograph of himself, his wife and nine of their twelve children.

"It's a great way to stay in shape," he quips, "raising a large family."

Bishop Siebach is the tall, athletic-looking head of the Rochester Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons.

And if there's anything that occupies the center of his and his Church's attention it's the importance and strength of the family unit.

Bishop Siebach is an assistant professor in the School of Applied Science of the College of Engineering at Rochester Institute of Technology.

The Mormons share with Catholics an intense concern over the vitality of the family and the sacredness of life.

The Church exists for the family, the bishop states.

On abortion, he feels that the enactment of less restrictive abortion statutes came from "social pressures placed on politicians."

"It's a criminal act," he says. "We feel it's a heinous act to take away the life of the unborn," yet he is also mindful of the "forgiveness of Christ in his infinite mercy" on those who engage in abortion and repent.

The Mormon Church, however, as a body, has not established political lobbies against the statutes, "and we push no candidates," emphasizing that Church members come from every political persuasion. Efforts against abortion are undertaken by individual Church members. "We encourage families to uphold righteous principals," he says.

The roles in the Mormon family are strictly defined. The husband is the head and the wife is the

heart, he says, raising and crossing his first two fingers to emphasize the unity between the two. Parents are strictly charged with all responsibilities for their children, and consider themselves exactly accountable to the judgment of God for their children's welfare.

Joseph Smith, the first Prophet of the Church, pronounced the revelation that the holy bonds of matrimony are for both time and for all eternity. As a consequence of this Mormon belief, divorce is exceedingly rare in the Church, and adultery, when repeated, is cause for excommunication, the bishop said.

Speaking both for himself and for Mormon men in general Bishop Siebach said, "My first calling is to sustain my family."

To encourage greater responsibility for that vocation, the Mormons have established programs where each family is visited by representatives of the Church. The representatives then make an oral report to the bishop, who in turn is able to assist when difficulties arise in the family unit.

The Mormons have a keen interest in education, establishing schools throughout the country, and even here "the family is the main citadel of learning," Bishop Siebach says.

It is a revelation, however, that Negroes may not be admitted to priesthood in the Mormon Church. That revelation will stand until another revelation through the Prophet of God supersedes it, the bishop said. Negroes, however, do participate in the Church as members.

The present Prophet of God and the President of the Church is Harold B. Lee. His position is analogous to the position of Pope Paul with the Roman Catholic Church, and Mormons afford him virtually the same reverence Catholics reserve for the pontiff. He holds the position for life.

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ON THE LINE Bob Considine

A peace of sorts has come to South Vietnam. But it will be a long time before the scars of the war can be covered. Just how long is open to conjecture. If there were a Gallup Poll in South Vietnam it might show that a lot of its people, perhaps a majority, suspect that the North Vietnamese and their allies inside South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, will move into political authority in the South before the billions the U.S. plans to spend to rehabilitate the land and its peoples can take effect.

In sorry contrast to the happy homecomings of American POWs, and the general relief in this country over even the half-baked ceasefire agreements, conditions among our South Vietnamese allies border on the intolerable.

Two reports from missionaries are at hand, each sounding a sobering note in the midst of the current euphoria elsewhere over the winding down of the long, costly, divisive conflict.

"Life in South Vietnam continues to be a constant challenge," writes the Roman Catholic bishop of Kontum, Paul L. Seitz. "Each day is met with apprehension and fear. The faces of my people reflect their misery and suffering. I see at first hand the terrible toll the war has taken, little children with horrible wounds have become commonplace. The orphan rate is escalating rapidly. (Ed. Note: Departed U.S. servicemen left about 15,000 war babies behind them, most of them either since abandoned by their mothers or considered pariahs by the families of the mothers.)

"Refugees are returning little by little to their homes to repair the severe damage inflicted during the fighting. We must feed many poor people, but rice is very dear. The price of everything is exorbitant.

"We have the added worries of malnutrition, dysentery, malaria and leprosy. . . I beseech you to hear my plea. . ."

One of the bishop's staff, a Father Andre Rannou, writes:

"As I do every day, at about 6:30, one recent morning I went to the chapel to celebrate Mass. Three people were waiting for me at the door, one of them a tall, well-built young man. 'Father,' he said, 'I have come to ask for some

rice. I can no longer stand the hunger.'

"Overburdened with pleas for help, tired by endless queues of refugees asking for rice, I was barely moved. My reply was hard: I told him that a strong young man such as he must look for work to earn his daily bread.

"In his expression I read all the distress in the world. He replied simply by showing me his arms, which he had hidden under his Montagnard clothing: both his hands were missing . . . blown off by a grenade. 'I can no longer do anything,' he said.

"I asked him to forgive me, and had a big sack of rice brought for him.

"The war had come to his village of Kon Toneh as it came to almost every place. Young people were taken into the forest by the (Viet Cong) guerrillas; there were repeated attacks on the village with tragic consequences: dead, wounded, orphaned; and some maimed for life, and finally total destruction by fire and evacuation of the survivors to some shanty town near Kontum, where they will have to get along somehow.

"But that was not all. These worthy people, who had suffered so much from the guerrillas, were now suspected by the government police of communicating with the enemy. Consider a man named Nho. He has been in prison for two years. His crime: to have been forced to listen to the ramblings of an armed Viet Cong agent one day while he was working in his rice field, far from the village. He sits in his little cell, worrying night and day about his wife and eight children. 'How will they be able to survive?' he asks me when I visit him. 'You will help them, won't you?' I have been helping them for two years.

"Today, Hen was the first to arrive. Hen is blind. During an attack on his village, his entire face was torn by grenade shrapnel. The eldest of his four sons, 12 years old, leads him to the mission each time the rice store is exhausted in their refugee camp.

"The sufferings of the body are displayed for all to see. The sufferings of the soul are less obvious—but, if anything, more terrible."

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