

Columnists

Shedding light on a new covenant

By Father Albert Shamon
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 14:12-16, 22-26; (R1) Exodus 24:3-8; (R2) Hebrews 9:11-15.

When an artist is going to paint a picture, he first pencils the sketch lightly on the canvas; then he daubs in the colors. God did something like that: He sketched in the Old Testament what was to happen in the New. Thus St. Augustine wrote: "The Old Testament is revealed in the New; and the New is concealed in the Old."

Christ established a new covenant with mankind. To help us better understand it, God cast shadows beforehand. He made a covenant with the Hebrews that sheds light on the covenant the Son of God made with us.

The first reading describes the old covenant God made with the Hebrews through Moses on Mt. Sinai. As always in works of grace, God took the initiative and invited the Hebrews to a friendship pact with Himself.

Moses "related all the words and ordinances of the Lord" which then were chiefly the Ten Commandments. He asked if the people were willing to keep these. They answered with one voice, "We will do everything that the Lord has told us." Moses wrote everything down: God's stipulations and the people's assent.

The next day Moses built an altar, surrounded with 12 pillars, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. Because the Levitical priesthood had not yet been established, Moses had certain young Israelites kill the victims for the sacrifice. He took half the blood and splashed it on the altar, which symbolized God. Then he reread to the people the agreement made the day before. After reaffirming their consent, he sprinkled the rest of the blood on the people.

Blood has a twofold significance: kinship and life. Blood creates kinship, makes blood-brothers. The relationship is so close we say "blood is thicker than water."

Blood is also necessary for life. Many a life has been saved by a blood transfusion. Throwing half the blood into the fire on the altar symbolized the rejection of a life of sin. Sprinkling the other half on the people signified a new life for the people — a "blood-

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relationship" with God. "I shall be your God; you shall be my people!"

As blood ratified the old covenant, so blood did the new: "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant" (R3). The second reading stresses the superiority of the new covenant over the old. The covenant in the Old Testament was made with the Hebrews only; in the New Testament, it is made with all peoples.

Sunday is the solemnity of the body and blood of Christ, as present here and now in the Eucharist. The Eucharist forges a link stronger than that of blood between the receiver and Christ, and between the receiver and all other receivers.

Too often we do not see the incongruity of going to Holy Communion while continuing to harbor hate, anger, bitterness and revenge. Our Lord said: "If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-4).

The bond of unity is love, and love is the sacramental grace of the Eucharist. If we receive our blessed Lord worthily, reverently and frequently, we shall be changed into loving persons.

"You shall not change Me into thee, as you do ordinary bread," Augustine heard Christ say to himself, "but you shall be changed into Me."

The bread of the Eucharist changes us, for it is truly the body and blood of Christ. And as many grains of wheat go into the making of the one bread, so we become one body in the eating of the one bread.

Authority versus authoritarianism

By Father Richard P. McBrien
I have a hunch that few of my readers saw Eugene Kennedy's recent article in America, "The Problem With No Name" (April 23). The essay is too important to let pass.

The "problem" to which Kennedy refers is that of authority. More specifically, it is the problem of discerning the difference between authoritarianism and genuine authority, and of making the transition from one to the other.

What's the difference? True authority is generative. It seeks to promote and nurture growth through guidance, encouragement, and support. Unhealthy authority, or authoritarianism, uses techniques of shaming and debasement to gain its way. It is not interested in the growth of those under its supervision so much as in the control of their behavior.

The revolt against authoritarianism has made the recognition or recovery of genuine authority very difficult, Kennedy argues.

In Kennedy's own field of specialization — psychology — dozens of books and hundreds of articles and research projects have focused on authoritarianism and its evils. On the other hand, he points out, "there is hardly any interest, much less research or writing, about authority as a sound and indispensable element of human growth."

This is a very serious deficiency because "any institution, including the family and the church, charged with responsibility for fostering healthy development must be knowing about the nature of authentic authority."

The difficulty in identifying true authority is compounded, Kennedy continues, by the media's approach to the whole problem. By focusing constantly on conflict, television and newspapers shape stories about the Catholic Church in the negative language of repression and rebellion.

"In fact," Kennedy insists, "very few Catholics want to rebel against church authority; hardly any want to overthrow the pope or, for that matter, be arbitrary in their judgments about curial decision."

In fact, segments of the Catholic Church that seem to be in violent disagreement about authority are actually troubled by the same problem. Both liberals and traditionalists are searching for "a credible authority in which to invest their trust and to identify healthy leaders whom they can willingly follow," Kennedy asserts.

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The reason why there is a crisis of authority today is primarily cultural and historical, not theological or ideological.

Authoritarians can no longer successfully control the flow of information in an age of communication. Because of space-age satellites, for example, the nuclear accident at Chernobyl could not be hidden even by the ultra-authoritarian and ultra-secretive regime in Moscow.

"The church," Kennedy declares, "must come to terms with the same truth about its own inability to censor, disallow or render itself insensitive to the real meaning of human experience or the impact of new knowledge in realms as different as human sexuality, freedom of inquiry and the evolving understandings of theology."

At the heart of the "problem" is the inability of authoritarian leaders to deal with the mystery that is at the heart of all true religion and all true human experience. These leaders are comfortable only with "unambiguous concrete faith." And that is why they possess so little true spiritual authority — authority that "naturally attracts the attention of searching believers."

Nothing illustrates this problem better than the official Church's distinct awkwardness in its dealings with women.

"Religious life," Kennedy suggests, "is ending because it can no longer function as a male-dominated culture, not because human beings lack profound spiritual aspirations."

"This turning away," Kennedy concludes, "represents a search for authority rather than a rejection of it."

"The more church leaders, still wearing its symbols in medieval court regalia, seek to reestablish authority as authoritarianism, the more surely they destroy their possibility of having any but remembered authority in the future."

And that's "the problem with no name?"



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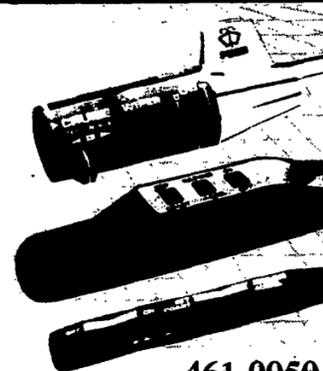
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