

Features

Father Richard McBrien addresses Church-state relations

By Lee Strong

In a presidential election year in which such issues as abortion, the death penalty and school prayer are topics of debate, people must keep in mind that "the state cannot act as a church," and, conversely, "neither can the Church act as a state," declared Father Richard P. McBrien.

"When the Church can't convince people that something is a sin, the Church can't run to the state and ask the state to make it a crime," explained Father McBrien, chairman of the theology department at Notre Dame University. On the other hand, "the state can't run to the Church to have something made a sin. Catholic principles reject both extremes."

Father McBrien visited Rochester October 3 to deliver the 1988 John Henry Newman Lecture at the University of Rochester. The nationally known controversial author, theologian and syndicated columnist addressed the topic "Religion and Politics in America."

In an interview prior to the lecture, Father McBrien observed that "what religion and politics share is a common concern about justice and peace." Because of these common concerns, the Catholic Church teaches that church and state must work together, he said. "What Vatican II teaches is neither complete separation nor complete union, but cooperation."

Father McBrien noted that in discussing religion and politics, people fail to make a distinction between morality and religion. "Not all morality is religiously based," he said. "People can press moral issues without being religious."

Father McBrien pointed out that a further distinction must be made between moral law — which deals with matters of conscience — and civil law, which is intended to ensure a just and orderly society. "Not everything in moral law can be translated into civil law," he said.

In order for such a translation to take place in a pluralistic society like the United States, the public must reach a consensus about the issue, Father McBrien said. He pointed to recent anti-smoking ordinances as an example of such consensus.

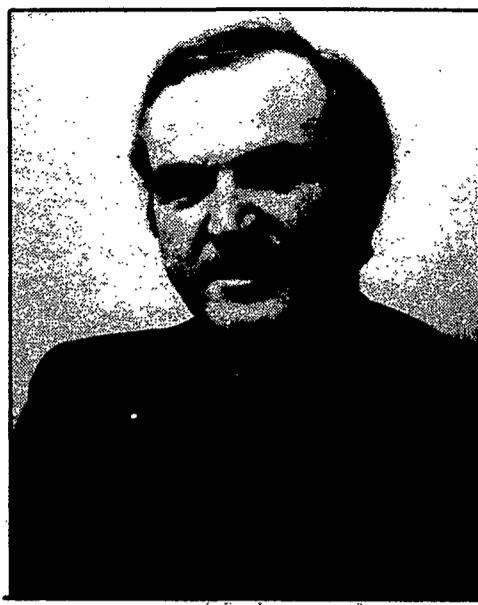
"The whole trend in our society is to restrict smokers," he noted. "Twenty years ago this was not possible because there was not enough public sentiment against it. Today, it's just the opposite; a consensus has evolved in recent years."

In light of this need for consensus, Church leaders who attack politicians for their stances on such issues as abortion are overlooking their own failure to help develop consensus.

Father McBrien noted that in their pastoral letters on peace and the economy, the U.S. Catholic bishops showed an understanding of the need for creating consensus. "When we do try to make a case in a political forum, we have

'Call Catholics for a Free Choice and ask if I'm a liberal. Call (feminist theologian) Rosemary Radford Reuther and ask if I'm a liberal. She'll laugh in your face.'

Fr. Richard McBrien



an obligation to bring forth arguments that will be persuasive to people — inside and outside of the Church as well," he said. "(The bishops) didn't just issue some moral statements, they showed some real understanding of the issues."

He also said that when addressing moral issues, Church people must be consistent about related issues if their positions are to have credibility. "It's politically incredible to argue against abortion, then adopt a right-wing stance on all other issues such as the death penalty, nuclear weapons, child care, Head Start, Aid to Families with Dependent Children," Father McBrien said.

He applauded the U.S. bishops for adopting a consistent-ethic-of-life approach, which he called a "far more challenging and demanding position" than the one held by abortion opponents who are not similarly pro-life on such issues as the death penalty and nuclear weapons. The bishops' position is one which can't be easily dismissed by either liberals or conservatives, he noted, adding, "the best moral stance also happens to be the best political stance."

The theologian also criticized calls by some groups for society to adopt "Judeo-Christian" beliefs.

"There's no such thing as a Judeo-Christian religion," he declared. "And even if there were, it can't be the established religion of our country" because of First Amendment guarantees of freedom of religion. Catholic tradition has recognized that a society can be morally sensitive without it following any religion, he asserted.

"We have always maintained that there is a law written on the human heart — the natu-

ral law — so it's possible for every human being to follow that law and create a just society," he said. "We don't need the establishment of a hybrid religion to create a moral society. We need examples — particularly from our leaders."

He noted, for example, that while President Ronald Reagan has openly supported prayer in schools, he doesn't attend church services himself. "They say it's because of security, but whatever the reason, the fact remains that he is not a churchgoer at the same time as he calls for greater emphasis on religious values," Father McBrien said.

On the other hand, when the Supreme Court banned prayer in schools in the 1962, President John F. Kennedy refused to raise the religion issue, the priest noted. Instead, Kennedy simply said that people would just have to work harder to get their children to pray at home.

"That's a good, common-sense approach," Father McBrien said. "If people were praying regularly and joyously at church and home, why should they have to pray in school? This is just an admission that religious leaders have failed to get people to pray. It's not the state's job to cover up for the failure of the Church!"

Such direct — and blunt — answers have earned Father McBrien a reputation as a liberal who helps foment dissent within the Church in this country. He, however, bristles at that characterization.

"Call Catholics for a Free Choice and ask if I'm a liberal," he said. "Call (feminist theologian) Rosemary Radford Reuther and ask if I'm liberal. She'll laugh in your face."

"The fact of the matter is I am a centrist," he continued. "My position gets defined by

people on the right?"

The far right tends to see the centrist position as too far to the left, Father McBrien noted. "I think if they were to look at the column I've written for 22 years, they'll find an unquestioning commitment to Catholic tradition and an effort that seeks to find a middle ground," he said. "I just happen to be a lightning rod. I happen to write what many Catholics and bishops are saying."

He acknowledged that his syndicated column, "Essays in Theology," draws fire from both the right and the left. He said that the column is aimed at an audience he believes is not well served by most diocesan newspapers.

"We are the most educated Catholic population in the world," Father McBrien said. "I think most people would say that what is written in the average diocesan paper is not sufficient for the educated Catholic reader."

The columns in most diocesan papers, he said, tend to be safe and conservative, as are most editors and their editorials.

"I think somewhere in the Catholic press there ought to be something an educated, sophisticated Catholic can get his teeth into and not feel they are being written down to," Father McBrien remarked.

Meanwhile, he said, the religious right within the Church which so often focuses their attacks on him, is losing ground because of doors opened by Vatican II. "The departure of Archbishop Lefebvre is showing how extreme and irrational the group that wants to go back is," the priest noted.

When he wrote his 1979 best seller, *Catholicism*, however, Father McBrien was not certain about the direction the Church would take as a result of the conflict between the traditionalists and the Vatican II supporters. In light of these doubts, he called the book's opening chapter "Catholicism in Crisis."

"Now, I wouldn't call it 'crisis,'" Father McBrien said. "I think I'd entitle it 'Catholicism in Transition' — moving from one vision to another. My own sense of things is that the crisis is being resolved in that the Church is affirming the Vatican II road."

He noted that the Church can no longer turn back to its pre-council form. "John Paul II could be succeeded by the most militant right-wing pope, and women wouldn't go back to the days when they were happy just to care for the flowers on the altar," he said. "Healthy men — and I emphasize healthy — are not going to rush back into the seminaries."

The choice for Church leaders today is whether they will provide leadership or try to impede progress.

"The ball is in the leadership's court," Father McBrien concluded. "Are you going to lead and encourage, or are you going to drive more people out of the Church?"

IS YOUR SERVICEMAN BLOWING A LOT OF HOT AIR INSTEAD OF YOUR FURNACE?

"We've had our furnace cleaned before by other heating contractors. Some of them left quite a mess when they were through. This year we decided to give Brandt Heating a try. Needless to say, we were very satisfied. Their serviceman was very polite and most importantly, he didn't leave a mess for us to clean up when he was finished."

Mrs. Ann Carter
Henrietta, NY

This Coupon is Worth

\$500 OFF

Any Cleaning or Service Call

BRANDT
Heating and Air Conditioning

You'll feel comfortable with us

288-4270

237 Winton Rd. North

BRANDT
Heating and Air Conditioning

237 Winton Rd. North • 288-4270

GENESEE FIGURE SKATING CLUB
presents

SKATING SPECTACULAR

October 21, 22, & 23 1988
RIT ICE ARENA



FEATURING

FORMER WORLD & NATIONAL PAIR CHAMPIONS

JO JO STARBUCK & KEN SHELLEY

LADIES U.S. BRONZE MEDALIST

CARYN KADAVY

BROTHER & SISTER NATIONAL PAIRS COMPETITORS

ARCHIE & GINGER TSE

NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL DANCE COMPETITORS

SUZANNE SEMANICK & RONALD KRAVETTE

GENESEE FIGURE SKATING CLUB SKATERS

FRIDAY, OCT. 21 8:00 PM	SATURDAY, OCT 22 8:00 PM	SUNDAY, OCT. 23 2:00 PM
DONATION	ADULTS \$8.00	CHILDREN (12 & Under) \$5.00

TICKETS AVAILABLE

- TICKETRON
- RIT ICE RINK
- SKATING INSTITUTE OF ROCHESTER
- GFSC CLUB MEMBERS
- AT THE DOOR