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Bishops, theologians and unity

By Father Richard P. McBrien

The church is the people of God and the body of Christ. On both counts, it is a community.

Communities can't exist, however, without communication. Where communication is informed and free-flowing, community tends to flourish. Where communication is blocked or distorted by misinformation, community tends to disintegrate.

The Catholic Church at the moment has a communications problem because people sometimes circulate judgments that are not based on facts, but on preconceived notions.

Such judgments are made before all the facts are in, and that's why they're called prejudgments — or just plain prejudice.

Prejudice is not limited to one side or another in a conflict. We're all prone to the temptation to reach hasty conclusions that are unfair and even injurious to one another. Such is the case when Catholics of a liberal orientation judge all bishops by the one or two whom they know and simply don't like.

There was much criticism, for example, of the public activities of "the bishops" during the 1984 U.S. presidential election campaign. Many Catholics complained that "the bishops" came down on the side of the Reagan-Bush ticket by being so rough on the Democratic candidate for vice president, Geraldine Ferraro.

But "the bishops" in this case amounted to only a handful. The overwhelming majority of bishops in 1984 maintained a careful neutrality during that campaign, as they did again in 1988.

"The bishops" are also portrayed sometimes as if they spend each waking hour trying to invent new ways of making life difficult for theologians and for pastoral ministers of every kind. Apart from the few bishops who feel compelled to pronounce regularly on the rights of the magisterium or the limits of theological inquiry, the vast majority of them are preoccupied each day with trying their best to manage the affairs of their diocese, encompassing hundreds and sometimes thousands of employees, properties, and assorted headaches.

Bishops were ordinary priests before they were installed in the episcopal office. Their original vocational choice was not to administer a diocese, but to minister to people in a parish setting.

Bishops are, first of all, priests. They find their vocational fulfillment in presiding at the Eucharist, proclaiming the Gospel, and ministering to the sick, the handicapped, the elderly,

Prophecies and Jesus' presentation

By Cindy Bassett

Just as a new day was beginning to take shape over the city of Jerusalem, a man's shouts shattered the stillness. His words seemed to echo because of the relative calm that exists at that time of the morning. As soon as he had broken the peace, two Roman soldiers hastened to where the man stood near the temple to silence him.

"There he is," one of the soldiers said, pointing. "It's just some crazy old man."

"What does he keep yelling?" his companion asked.

"Something about a new king being born," the first soldier replied. "Just the same, he needs to be stopped. Such bold statements are just the thing to rankle King Herod if they should reach his ears."

"Move along now!" the soldier ordered as he grabbed the author of these statements by the elbow and shoved him.

The old man, whose name was Simeon, did nothing to resist and the two soldiers were confident that they had made a point of Roman authority. He merely turned away from them both and headed up the steps to the temple.

But just before Simeon disappeared inside, he turned back and shouted once more: "A new king has been born! He will rule the entire world with peace."

One of the soldiers started back angrily after Simeon, but his companion checked his efforts. The street was quiet again and empty except for the young couple with the baby who also headed up the steps to the temple. If they had seen the incident at all, they pretended not to have noticed.

As soon as the couple entered the temple, the young woman turned to her husband and asked, "Joseph, do you remember the story of the boy, Samuel?"

"Yes, Mary, of course I do," Joseph replied. "He grew up to be a great prophet for Israel."

"And how much greater Jesus will be," Mary stated. "Samuel's mother left her son at the temple with the priest so that he could serve God."

"Mary, what are you saying?" Joseph asked, his face puzzled.

"After we present Jesus to the Lord, perhaps

Essays in Theology

erly, young people, and men and women of every station in life.

As priests and pastors, for example, their instinct would always be to provide the Eucharist for anyone who asked for it — even if they happened to be gay or lesbian.

As officials of the church, however, they feel bound to implement policies mandated from on high. And so they shut down the Masses for gays and lesbians, but not without much private pain in their hearts — their pastoral hearts.

Catholics on the other side also make misinformed judgments about theologians. They judge the whole lot by the one, or two, or three whom they've read about, or heard about, and simply don't like. They think that theologians spend each of their waking hours trying to devise ways of making life difficult for the bishops and of further confusing the faith.

Apart from a very small number of theologians who are drawn into public controversy, often against their intentions and their desires, most theologians go about their research, their teaching, and their writing without any reference whatever to issues like infallibility, dissent, collegiality, magisterium, or academic freedom.

Take another look at the Creed all Catholics proclaim together at each week's Eucharist. That's where one finds what's really central and essential to Catholic faith. And theologians don't "dissent" from any of it.

We believe that God created all things, including ourselves. We believe that Jesus Christ is "the only Son of God," that he was crucified, and rose for our salvation.

We believe that the Lord will come again, and that his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the church, and one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We believe in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting.

Bishops and theologians proclaim that Creed together — without hesitation or reservation. If they differ at all, they differ over things that are not in the Creed.

The Bible Corner

we should leave him here at the temple. At least he would be safe," she explained.

"God has already asked you to be his mother," Joseph said.

According to Hebrew law, every first-born male must be presented to God at the temple. Joseph bought two turtledoves for a sacrifice, and Jesus was presented.

Afterward, as Mary and Joseph prepared to leave, Simeon came rushing up to them. He carefully took the baby from Mary and said, "Now, oh God, I am ready to die in peace. For today, I have seen your promise to Israel fulfilled. I hold in my arms the light of the world!"

Mary and Joseph were still pondering his strange words when Anna, an old prophetess, came and joined them. She was a widow who spent nearly all of her time at the temple, fasting and praying.

"This child is the one that all of Israel has been waiting for!" Anna proclaimed. "He is the salvation of the world!"

Simeon blessed them and turned to Mary and said, "Many in the world will not accept him and this will be their downfall. But many others will be saved by his coming. And because of all that will happen, a sword of sorrow will pierce your own heart." Mary and Joseph marveled at these events at the temple. They talked of nothing else as they traveled back to their hometown of Nazareth.

"They recognized Jesus," Mary said. "Even as a baby they saw the Messiah!"

"And when Jesus grows up, many more will know who he is," Joseph added.

"For now, we shall serve God with our lives everyday in Nazareth," Mary said with a smile.

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 2:22-40; 1 Samuel, Chapter 1.

Meditation: Do I recognize Jesus in my daily life?