

Church's life suffers from low morale among priests

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

"Reflections on the Morale of Priests" is one of the most important documents ever released by the U.S. Catholic bishops. Unfortunately, it will never achieve the public recognition of their earlier, and justly celebrated, pastoral letters on peace and the economy.

Prepared by a subcommittee of the bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, the report concludes that "there exists today a serious and substantial morale problem among priests in general."

This finding should concern every committed member of the Catholic Church because, as the report correctly points out, "when the morale of priests is high, the mission and ministry of the church becomes a positive experience for all within the Christian community."

"When the morale of priests is low," on the other hand, "the quality of ecclesial life diminishes and almost every area of

church life suffers, from evangelization to vocations, from liturgical celebrations to service with and to the people of God."

According to the report, priests are simply exhausted. But theirs is more than a merely physical exhaustion. Many priests feel caught between two forces: their own sound pastoral instincts, often honed over 20-40 years of priestly ministry, and the directives and policy statements they regularly receive from on high.

"Some priests feel that at times they are passing on to parishioners, who clearly disagree, pastoral decisions which they sense their bishops do not fully endorse and which they themselves personally question. 'Caught in the middle' is an apt description."

The bishops' report puts its finger directly on the problem: "Many (particularly in the 45 to 60 age group) feel they have worked hard and long to implement, or at least adjust to, the practical consequences of Vatican II. They sense that much of that effort

is now being blunted or even betrayed and they elect to drop out quietly."

The bishops are reluctant to identify the blunters and the betrayers of the conciliar mandate, so I will.

The priests, especially in this 45 to 60 generation, are demoralized by the Church's current papal/curial administration. They see it as driven by a rigid, ideologically conservative agenda that brooks no disagreement of any kind.

They are particularly discouraged by the recent pattern of episcopal appointments in which ideologically "safe" men are selected over priests who, because of truly enviable pastoral records, enjoy the confidence and respect of their brother priests, religious, and lay ministers.

Let me express the frustration of this middle generation of priests (and others) in unambiguous terms: If, for example, the priests and lay ministers of the Diocese of Brooklyn were allowed to elect the successor to their much-beloved Bishop Francis J. Mugavero, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan would probably win in a landslide. But anyone who knows the score will tell you that a Joe Sullivan doesn't have a

chance in this regime. "He's too good," everyone says — sadly."

What kind of Church are we running here when bishops and priests as outstanding as Joe Sullivan are blocked while other bishops and priests, safely "orthodox" in theology and securely "loyal" to the Holy See, are promoted — frequently to gasps of disbelief from fellow priests, from lay ministers, and even from fellow bishops?

The episcopal-appointments phenomenon is not unrelated to another aspect of the priestly morale problem: ecclesiological conflict. According to the bishops' report, priests and parish staffs are frustrated and demoralized when they have to live and work side-by-side with fellow priests with whom they differ strongly about the very nature and mission of the church. The problem is magnified when they find themselves in ecclesiological conflict with their bishop.

Given the recent pattern of episcopal appointments, this problem is going to get worse, not better.

More about the priestly morale problem next week.

Baptismal covenant promises future transformation

A WORD FOR SUNDAY

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 9:28-36; (R1) Genesis 12:5-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1.

In the first reading, God makes a covenant with Abraham. The Hebrew word for covenant, *berith*, means "a cutting." When we make an agreement, we might say, "Let's shake hands on it." When nomads in Abraham's day made a pact, they cut animals in two and walked between them as if to say, "If I break the pact, let me be cut in two."

Covenants are made between equals. So a covenant between God and man is not one strictly speaking. If you notice, in the covenant with Abraham, Abraham is asleep. It is God who acts, who makes the offers. He offers Abraham land and descendants; in return, He asks only for faith.

Baptism is our covenant with the Lord. He makes us sons of God and of the church, generally when we are asleep in infancy. All He asks is that we walk as children of the light, offering light to others, by renouncing Satan and all his works of

hate and dissension.

The story of the transfiguration climaxes Our Lord's Galilean ministry. Many of the details of the event recall Mt. Sinai: Moses, the mountaintop, the cloud, the glory. However, there was this difference: the glory on Moses' face was reflected light; but not so with Jesus. His glory was from within Himself. The sun of His divinity shone through the cloud of His humanity, irradiating His body and garments.

Jesus went up the mountain to pray. While praying, He was changed. Prayer ought to change us. If it does not, we are not praying aright. Our Lady at Medjugorje again and again warned us against praying through habit — "saying" prayers, not praying. She said, "Pray with your heart. Mean what you say and say what you mean." In prayer we can discover Jesus — "my Son, my Chosen One."

After the transfiguration, Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem to suffer and die. It was of this that Moses and Elijah spoke — "they spoke of his passage (*exodos*: His death-resurrection-ascension)." They were confirming Jesus in His resolve to go

to Jerusalem to suffer and die. How real is the Communion of Saints and how interested they are in what happens to us on earth.

When we are faced with problems, as Jesus was, we ought not only to pray but also to look beyond the problem to the resulting good. Good Fridays are never forever. There is Easter. Jesus let His disciples behold the glory to come in order to carry them over the scandal of the cross.

When Hannibal was crossing the Alps, he met the discouragement of his soldiers by saying, "Post Alpes, Italia" — "After the Alps, Italy," with its sunny clime, its olive groves, its rich vineyards. So also Jesus held up to His followers the goal to which suffering borne for God leads — they are as nothing compared to the glory to come.

The transfiguration climaxes with the voice from the clouds, as at Jesus' baptism. It confirms Peter's previous profession of faith — Jesus is truly the Son of God, His Chosen One. But it also adds the admonition to "Listen to him"; that is, accept His teachings on the cross.

The three disciples behave disappointingly. Like Abraham, they sleep; they will do the same in Gethsemane. Peter babbles incoherently about setting up three booths. Peter forgot the other disciples, the world below, and the generations to come. Such is the danger of all followers of Christ: to be concerned only about one's salvation. No wonder Our Lady has consistently as-

ked us to pray for the conversion of sinners and the poor souls in purgatory. The me-only syndrome is too much with us.

When Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, He cured a boy possessed by the devil. Raphael caught the connection between the transfiguration and healing in his last great painting, "The Transfiguration." He died painting the face of the transfigured Christ.

The painting is in three levels. The upper shows Christ in glory; the middle, the three apostles; and the lowest, in darksome colors, shows some of the disciples and the family of the sick boy.

The contrast is striking between the glory, where sin and death are not, and the world beneath, where man is unable to cope with evil and the devil. Had Christ remained on the mount, as Peter had suggested, the scene of man trapped by evil would have remained unchanged.

Our moments of glory are meant to sustain us so that we might bring Christ to the sick, the suffering, those enslaved by Satan and sin — for He alone can transfigure each person and the human race.

Project Life schedules annual banquet for Feb. 24

The third annual Project Life of Rochester banquet is scheduled for Friday, Feb. 24, at 7 p.m. at the Mapledale Party House, 1020 Maple St., Rochester.

Reservations are needed by Monday, Feb. 20. Call 716/235-1611 for information.

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