

# Time to act on problem of low morale among priests

## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Father Richard C. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

"Reflections on the Morale of Priests," a report issued last year by a subcommittee of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry and recently published in *Origins* (Jan. 12, 1989), ranks as one of the more important documents ever to come out of the national episcopal conference. It should be read, not only by every priest, but by every person who cares about the future of the Catholic Church.

"When the morale of priests is low," the report observes, "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."

Priests are demoralized today because they feel themselves "caught in the middle;" pulled in one direction by their own pastoral experience and the needs of their people, and pulled in another direction by official policies and directives from on high.

The problem is exacerbated by the tone and style of the church's current papal/curial administration and especially by the pattern of recent episcopal appointments — which leads many priests to conclude that the future will be even worse than the present.

But there are other sources of discouragement and demoralization as well.

According to the report, good priests are demoralized by the constant carping attacks from the right — from "unreasonable and often well-organized opposition of the self-styled orthodox and of those who simply do not believe in the decisions and directions of Vatican II." This creates a "debilitating wear" on priests whose calling is to exercise a ministry of healing and reconciliation. Instead, they often find themselves engaged in battle with de-

termined and mean-spirited people.

But there is even more to the morale problem. Our priests are also discouraged by the durability of the problem-priest, i.e., the type who didn't work very hard in the pre-Vatican II Church and who still isn't working very hard in the post-Vatican II Church. These are men of "limited energy and regular absenteeism," to use the report's own words.

In the past, with so many other priests on the job, the deficiencies of the problem-priest could be "easily disguised or replaced." Not so today. Unfortunately, these problem-priests take up much of the valuable time and energy of diocesan personnel boards and bishops, as they seek to find assignments for them where they will do the least amount of harm to the church.

What really discourages many hard-working priests is the knowledge that some possible avenues of relief are not even allowed to be discussed, much less implemented. These avenues include the ordina-

tion of married men, effective use of laicized priests, the ordination of women, and elimination of obligatory celibacy.

Indeed, the bishops' report acknowledges that virtually "every study or commentary done on the priesthood and shortage of vocations mentions sexuality (and specifically mandatory celibacy) as a major reason a) for leaving the priesthood, b) for shortage of vocations and c) for loneliness and personal unhappiness of those who stay."

But most church officials seem to act as if these studies didn't even exist. And that in itself is cause for further demoralization.

The report offers a number of recommendations, a couple of which are given here by way of example.

"A major factor in low morale," the report concludes, "is the perception by priests that they have no control, that they are impotent before major events and directions of their lives and of their church."

Therefore, priests must have a meaningful voice in the formulation of diocesan policies regarding such important matters as sacramental practices and parish structures.

Bishops, furthermore, must be "frank and honest" with priests about their own frustrations and questions. Priests must be able to feel that bishop "really understands" because he himself is "in the same boat."

Indeed, bishops must also be honest and frank with one another, not only about personal pressures and frustrations, but also about "the hard issues that confront the living church" regionally, nationally, and internationally.

Not surprisingly, the report falters when it tries to fashion recommendations regarding the abiding and utterly crucial problem of obligatory celibacy. The report admits that the traditional rationale for obligatory celibacy is inadequate. But the bishops lamely recommend that "new language be found."

Such language doesn't exist, and priests and laity alike know it. The challenge is not finding new words, but facing reality. By and large, however, Bishop John McRaith and his subcommittee have done a good job of addressing the problem of priestly morale, and they should be commended for their report. It's time now to do something about it.

## A healer of bodies, spirits and lives

### THE BIBLE CORNER

By Cindy Bassett  
Catholic Courier columnist

He was known throughout the region as the great healer. Everywhere Jesus went to preach, the crowds followed with their sick to be restored by him. He healed the blind, the crippled and those afflicted with leprosy. Now as I stood waiting in the courtyard outside of Simon's house, I hoped Jesus could heal my own life.

The first time I ever saw Jesus was by the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly as he sat teaching, a group of Pharisees came with a young woman. Her name was Rachel, and I knew her circumstances well.

I quickly crossed the street and from my vantage point behind a tree, I watched one of Rachel's accusers point at her and say, "This woman was caught in adultery. The law of Moses is quite clear on offenses of

this sort — death by stoning!" Then, turning to Jesus, he asked, "What do you have to say about her?"

I waited for Jesus to condemn her, too, but he said nothing at all. Instead, he bent down and began tracing on the ground with his finger.

"Well, what shall be done about this woman?" the Pharisee said, persisting.

Jesus stood and faced the crowd of onlookers. "If there is anyone here today who is without sin," he stated, "let this person be the first one to throw a stone at this woman." And he went back to tracing on the ground.

I watched Rachel, who never once looked up at her accusers. Not one of them raised a hand against her. One by one, they filed away until only Jesus was left with Rachel.

"Has anyone condemned you?" Jesus asked her gently.

"No one, sir," Rachel replied.

"Neither do I. Go now and leave your life of sin," Jesus told her.

With this incident in mind, I finally crossed the courtyard to enter Simon's house. I could hear the sounds of a huge crowd and I was certain that many of Simon's friends would know me. Here no one would admit it. He was a wealthy man of considerable influence and his guest list would no doubt include the rich and politically powerful.

My eyes scanned the room until I spotted the guest of honor. Once I found Jesus, I went quickly over to where he sat at a table. For just a fleeting moment, I looked into his face and I knew I had been right in

coming to see him. A floral bouquet embodied the room as I broke the seal on the expensive perfume and poured the entire contents on his feet. Relief washed over me in a flood of tears.

Suddenly, all were silent and stared as I continued washing Jesus' feet. I heard Simon remark glibly to one of his guests nearby, "Why does he allow this spectacle? If Jesus is a prophet, then he would know what sort of woman she is." I felt my face sting with embarrassment.

"Simon, I have a question for you," Jesus said. "Two people owed a sum of money to a moneylender. One of them owed \$500, and one's debt was only \$50. Nevertheless, neither of them had the means to repay his debt. So the moneylender canceled the debts of both of them. Now, Simon, which person would be the most grateful?"

"I suppose the one with the greater debt," Simon replied.

"You have answered correctly," Jesus said.

Puzzled, Simon looked around at his guests to see if anyone would ask what the story meant.

"This woman has not stopped showing her love for me since the moment she entered your house. You, on the other hand, barely offered me the usual courtesies extended to a guest. Her sins, which are many, are forgiven because of her great love. The self righteous, who think they have little to be forgiven, love only a little," Jesus stated.

Now it was Simon who flushed with embarrassment. Jesus turned to me and said, "Your faith in me has saved you. Go in peace now."

Scripture reference: Luke 7:36-50; John 8:1-11.

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