

How can we keep Hispanics in the church?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

According to a recent report in *The New York Times*, some four million of the roughly 20 million Hispanic Americans are now Protestant. Most of these are in pentecostal and fundamentalist sects rather than the mainline denominations.

At one time, virtually every Hispanic American belonged to the Catholic Church. What has happened and what, if anything, can be done about it?

Many Hispanic Catholics regard the U.S. Catholic scene as an alien and unwelcoming cultural environment. The parishes are too large, the liturgies too staid, the preaching too cerebral, the spirituality too moralistic, the experience of church too bureaucratic.

Evangelical Protestant churches, on the

other hand, offer a simple message with an appealing emotional power. What is perhaps more important, their ministers offer caring personal contact — home visitation, small-group prayer, and direct material assistance — that the Catholic Church cannot provide. Nationwide there are fewer than 2,000 Hispanic priests.

Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio admitted in an interview with *The Times* that Catholics "do not begin to match the kind of outreach efforts put on by the sects." He noted at the same time that earlier immigrant groups brought their own clergy with them and established their own parishes, with their own languages and customs.

"This has never been the case with Hispanics," he observed, "and until recently there has not been an emphasis on promot-

ing Hispanic vocations."

But what can be done about this situation? It does no good, after all, to complain about the lack of Hispanic vocations without facing up to the root cause of the problem.

Are young Hispanic men actively discouraged from pursuing a priestly vocation? Is there discrimination against Hispanic seminarians? Are Hispanic priests blocked from ecclesiastical advancement?

On the contrary, given an affirmative-action-minded society and a Church that is at a near-panic stage over the loss of so many Hispanic Catholics, it would seem that a gifted Hispanic seminarian or priest could write his own ticket, so to speak.

The problem lies elsewhere, and Dean Hoge, a professor of sociology at The Catholic University of America and a rec-



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

ognized authority on the shortage of priests, has put his finger on it.

Young men who might otherwise be drawn to a life of priestly ministry do not seriously consider it today for one principal reason: they want to retain the option to marry.

The resistance to celibacy, inside and outside the Hispanic community, has little or nothing to do with a generosity of spirit and a spirit of sacrifice. Many young men (and women) are ready, willing, and able to offer themselves and their talents in the service of the Church. They would answer the call to priestly ministry in a moment if celibacy were not a condition of acceptance.

But it remains the great unmentioned problem. In some cultures and on some continents, in fact, there is a kind of conspiracy of silence about it. The laity and even the hierarchy ignore open violations. In some places around the world — Latin America included — many priests live in common-law marriages. Their wives and children are known and accepted in the local community.

Such arrangements, however, are becoming increasingly objectionable, not only because they are dishonest but, more seriously, because of their injustice to women. As the consciousness of society and the Church alike are raised and transformed, these traditional circumventions of the celibacy law become progressively intolerable.

Father J. Juan Diaz Vilar, a Jesuit at the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center in New York, told *The Times* that we shouldn't place all the blame on the sects for the wholesale defection of Hispanic Catholics. He insisted — correctly, I think — that "the real problem is with us." We have to "change and renovate" the Catholic Church itself.

But words like those are easy to say. Change what, precisely? Renovate what, exactly? If not the human-made law of celibacy, then what?

An Independence Day look at liberty's misuse

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 5:51-62; (R1) 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21; (R2) Galatians 5:1, 13-18.

July 4th is Independence Day, the day we celebrate our first fight for freedom, our Declaration of Independence.

Sometimes, I think we forget that patriotism is a virtue, that love of homeland goes hand in hand with love of home — the virtue of piety.

I have traveled much in foreign lands, and I tell you I have never found a land more lovely than America. God has blessed her with resources surpassing those of all other lands. But His greatest blessing is liberty. In his fiery speech in the Virginia Convention, March 1775, Patrick Henry voiced the innate desire of all peoples when he thundered, "Give me liberty or give me death" — words for which heroic Chinese youths have died.

But liberty imposes great responsibility. In fact, when God's people were freed from Egyptian slavery, they often yearned for slavery to avoid the arduous burden of living as free men.

Liberty is not license to do as one pleases. Liberty is the power to do as one



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

ought, to act responsibly. Either we use our liberty aright or we abuse it. If we abuse it, we soon lose it. Katherine Lee Bates concludes her beautiful poem "America" with: "Confess thy soul in self-control/Thy liberty in law."

Only the law-abiding shall secure liberty. Lincoln said, "America would never be conquered from without; but, if conquered, it would be from within."

I write this column because the recent Supreme Court Decision said that it is OK to burn the American flag as a protest. The split decision must have raised eyebrows throughout the nation. Back in 788 A.D. the Second Council of Nicea condemned iconoclasm, statue-smashing. The Supreme Court is guilty of political iconoclasm!

The desecration of the flag is a violent act, certainly far more than the simple burning of a bundle of colored cloth. To

veterans, the flag is the venerated reminder of everything they fought for and for which their comrades died. Certainly there are better ways of freely expressing dissent.

The First Amendment was never meant to exalt individual liberty above the common good; and yet that is the construction put upon it by a court that has kicked God out of schools and public life, that has opened the door to hard-core pornography, that has legitimized the murder of babies, and now defends the desecration of the American flag.

So, on this Fourth of July, let us pray, especially the daily rosary, that we get God back into our lives and country. Only as a God-fearing nation shall we become great again.

Secondly, let us get patriotism back into American life. Start by making the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag compulsory in all our schools. The common good takes precedence over individual likes and dislikes.

I am a Catholic. I am proud that I am a Catholic. I love my faith. I love the Holy Father. But I love my country too. It is my fatherland. And so I, as any right-thinking American should, pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands — one nation under God!

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