

Neither pole offers a valid solution to crisis

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

All the surveys, including a front-page story in the July 7 Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, continue to report a steady downturn in the number of vocations to the ordained priesthood. Although the U.S. Catholic population grew by 15 percent over the last 20 years, the number of seminarians in graduate-level studies declined by more than half.

What these surveys cannot statistically capture is something that is usually acknowledged only in private: namely, the concomitant change in the quality of the candidates. A disconcerting number of those entering the seminary these days have been found to be passive, dependent, rigid and authoritarian. And more and more candidates are gay and/or sexually immature.

There are at least two unhelpful reactions

to this negative trend.

The first comes from those on the church's left, which jubilantly predicts the impending demise of the priesthood altogether. At long last, they declare, Catholicism is about to be liberated from its clerical chains.

The second reaction comes from those on the church's right, who see the decline of vocations as the inevitable outcome of moral laxity and doctrinal compromise. Only through an uncompromising return to traditional piety and orthodoxy, they insist, can the church once again attract the numbers it requires for the priesthood.

Both reactions are unhelpful because neither has anything realistic to offer by way of a solution.

There are times, of course, when one is tempted to believe that those on the left may be correct.

Many of the church's most effective

priests are getting older, and they're not being replaced, man-for-man, because the factors that once stimulated and shaped their own vocations are no longer at work. The priesthood hasn't been attracting the best and the brightest of Catholic high school graduates in recent years. According to a recent study by Sister Katarina Schuth of the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, at least "the top tenth" intellectually has been lost (*Reason for Hope*, Glazier, 1989).

Well-educated and increasingly affluent Catholic families no longer view the priesthood as the status symbol it once was perceived to be. Their sons have more choices before them now — beyond joining the police force, the fire department, the FBI, or entering a seminary.

And because of a serious morale problem within the ranks of the priesthood, confirmed by a recent subcommittee report



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, priests themselves no longer encourage young men to follow in their footsteps.

But a priestless Church is no "solution" to a major pastoral problem.

The church needs qualified and gifted people to preside at the Eucharist and to coordinate the multiple activities of a parish community. The ordained priesthood is utterly crucial to the life and mission of the Church.

But need these priests be celibate males? That's a question that some Catholics refuse even to discuss.

The church's ultraconservative wing doesn't want the priesthood to disappear, only certain kinds of priests. To produce the "right" kind, the recipe is simple: Get back to basics. Open wide the seminary doors to prayerful, devout and obedient young men. And purge the faculties of dissenters.

The "basics" they have in mind are an advanced version of the Baltimore Catechism, untouched by Vatican II and the last 25 years of theological and catechetical thought.

But that is a prescription for going backwards, for repudiating the Second Vatican Council or at least for pretending it never happened.

Opening wide the seminary doors means, as anyone with any experience in seminary work knows, admitting intellectually inadequate and psychologically unstable people. These candidates may satisfy a hunger for numbers in the short run, but they create havoc for the church in the long run.

Many bishops and pastors have discovered this too late, much to their sorrow and regret. More pragmatic than ideological, they're not likely to make the same mistake over and over again.

Purges, finally, are more scandalous than the alleged evils they are designed to eliminate. People today, especially an increasingly well-educated Catholic public, are appalled by efforts to muzzle and censure those who dare to think or express views at variance with an official line.

They believe in the biblical Gamaliel principle: if it's not of God, the dissenting view will fall of its own weight, but if it is of God, we would be found "opposing God" (Acts 5:38-39).

Accordingly, an increase of passive-dependent and rigid-authoritarian clerical types via lower seminary-admission standards is no solution either. Such individuals prove ineffective in parish ministry because, among other things, their theology and personalities render them incapable of exercising ministry in a truly collaborative way, especially with women.

Only when the broad center of the Church is willing to discuss realistic solutions openly will the situation begin to change. In the meantime, we should cherish, encourage and support those thousands of good priests we already have.

The coming of Christ brings division to the world

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 12:49-53; (R1) Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; (R2) Hebrews 12:1-4.

The aged Simeon pronounced an ominous prophesy over the newborn son of Mary at his presentation: "Behold this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted ..." (2:34).

Later, John the Baptizer announced about the Coming One: "... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:16-17).

And so it happened. Fire is the symbol of God's judgment: it purifies the good (the wheat) and destroys the evildoer (the chaff). "I have come to light a fire."



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

This fire was lit on Calvary by the passion and death of Jesus. "I have a baptism to receive." Baptism is the symbol of the depth of the sea of suffering into which Jesus would be plunged by His upcoming passion and death.

Regardless, Jesus ardently desired this destiny. "What anguish I feel till it is over." He so desired it because the Father would be glorified, the new age begun, and our salvation completed.

The inexorable effect of this fire of judgment that Jesus cast on the earth is division. The cause of this division is Jesus Himself. He said as much in the three "I-sayings" of the Gospel: "I have come to light a fire ...," "I have a baptism to receive ...," and "I have come for division ..."

Sometimes we might think the following of Christ is to be an untroubled and peaceful journey. Actually, fidelity to the Christian life results in powerful conflicts and divisions. I remember when abortion was an issue in the hospital in my parish, the

Catholic doctors told me how sad it was that the issue had divided old friends: the doctors for abortion from those against it. Before this issue, they told me, they were all one; after it, they became a divided house.

The first reading exemplifies how fidelity to God's word divided the prophet Jeremiah from the "princes" or leaders of Jerusalem. Jeremiah spoke God's word in those turbulent years between the capture of Jerusalem (598 B.C.) and its fall (586 B.C.). His mission was to call the people to repentance in order to prevent the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah insisted that the Jews could not win a war with Babylon. He recommended submission.

Other false "prophets" said the Jews could win and, they urged rebellion. Jeremiah rightly called this national suicide. The people's response was to brand him a traitor, a prophet of gloom and doom. No one would listen to him. Instead they tried to silence him by casting him into a muddy cistern to starve to death.

The responsorial psalm tells us Jeremiah prayed in his miry grave and the Lord heard his cry and drew him out of the pit of destruction. Like Jeremiah, Jesus would go to Jerusalem and die and be raised up out of the miry cistern of death. And His resurrection has lit the fire of division.

Christians must be prepared for division. Christ's peace is not inconsistent with social division. "I have come to bring not peace but the sword" (Matthew 10:34). "Beat your plowshares into swords," said Joel, "and your pruning hooks into spears" (4:10).

The Christian life is a warfare. The coming of Jesus marks a time of decision, of the rise and fall of many. This is precisely the fire Christ came to light. Jesus will not tolerate peace at any price, compromising principles: going along just to get along. You cannot drive in neutral. "You cannot serve two masters." "I wish you were either cold or hot. Because you are lukewarm ... I will spit you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16).

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



EDWIN SULEWSKI
FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Why is there such an emphasis on death and grief today?

There have been great advances in medical science which have removed death from the daily lives of most Americans. Because of this we are generally unfamiliar with death and grief. We are fortunate that our experience with death has lessened, but nevertheless it's important to learn about the things we can do to help ourselves and friends. Making wills and understanding how to help our grieving friends will help us cope better when the stress of a death comes into our lives. Avoiding death by ignoring it, by not making wills or by not going to funerals or visitations is a denial of reality!

We purchase all forms of insurance to protect our family & assets, not because we expect the worst to happen, but to be prepared. Doesn't it make sense then to prepare for what will happen. Let our trained counselors assist you with the many options available in planning for a worry-free future.

Burial Cremation Entombment

Directed retreats planned

The Cenacle, 693 East Ave., Rochester, is offering directed retreats Aug 22-30.

During a directed retreat, individual participants meet each day with experienced leader for guidance in prayer and spiritual direction. The length of the retreat is determined by the participant's schedule.

For further information and reservations, contact: the Cenacle Ministry Office, 693 East Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14607, 716/271-8755.



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