

Church of next century will be different

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated Columnist

It doesn't take any special powers of observation and analysis to see that the Catholic Church, as we have known it through most of this century, is in the process of dissolution.

The key words here are "as we have known it through most of this century." It is not being asserted that the church as such is falling apart. Rather, one phase of its life is ending and another still largely unknown phase is beginning.

Religious orders (again, as we have known them over the past several decades) are disappearing. The older and middle-aged nuns are simply not being replaced. Anyone can see that, and no one more clearly than the nuns themselves.

The Catholic Church should be enormously grateful for all that these religious women have meant to the church. The extraordinary progress and achievements of the Catholic Church in modern times would have been inconceivable without the dedicated efforts and leadership of its nuns.

But that day is ending, and there is no use pretending otherwise. The church is about to enter a new era, one without the number of nuns and the kind to which we had grown accustomed.

The same is also true of the priesthood. Oh, to be sure, the Catholic Church could have as many priests as it would like, even without changing the laws of celibacy or permitting the ordination of women, if it would do just one thing: remove all other barriers and accept anyone who applies.

There are all sorts of troubled, unmarried men who think that God is calling them to the priesthood. Seminary files have been bulging for years with their often pathetic letters of application. Fortunately, the church has had too much integrity and too much regard for its priesthood to advance such people to ordination.

The church knows that it is far better to have too few priests than to have pastorally incompetent priests. Again, the critical situation is there for any dispassionate observer to see. As the senior and middle-aged priests pass from the scene, they are not being replaced man-for-man by younger priests of similar pastoral quality.

The authority structures of the church are also being redefined. Catholics will still come out to cheer a visiting pope, but

they pay little or no attention to what he or any of the other bishops have to say — unless it makes sense to them. In other words, the day of taking things on authority is over.

The shining achievement of U.S. Catholicism — namely, its extraordinary network of colleges, universities, high schools, and elementary schools — has produced an educated Catholic community. An educated Catholic is more likely to be able to tell the difference between what is at the core of Catholic faith and practice and what is only marginal.

For that reason they are also less likely to be impressed with the trappings of ecclesiastical authority — the titles, the vestments, the threats of spiritual penalties. Indeed, nothing "turns off" the educated Catholic more quickly than threats. They simply can't be intimidated any longer by the fear of hell. Nothing works except persuasion. And nothing persuades like example.

If church authorities are persons of ob-

vious moral integrity, if they seem to practice what they preach and teach, then Catholics — especially educated Catholics — will listen.

The late Pope Paul VI made that very same point in his remarkable 1975 document, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), which stated that "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

So it is not that Catholics today are more rebellious, but that they are more critical, more discerning. They don't believe that God expects them to accept and to obey anything and everything a person in authority tells them. And they are right.

As the Catholic Church passes from one century to another, it is shedding one form of life for another. The church will live on in the 21st century because it is the Body of Christ. But because it is a body, it will continue to change and develop.

Just as the infant cannot forever remain

Disloyalty to the one true God paves a way for Solomon's end

By Cindy Bassett
Courier Columnist

One day, as Jeroboam was returning home from work, he met the prophet Ahijah on the road leading from Jerusalem.

The prophet greeted him with a question. "What do you think of King Solomon's ability as a ruler for the people of Israel?"

"King Solomon is known to all as a great builder," he replied, pointing back to the city outlines. "There is peace on all our borders. And I have just been promoted to overseer of the labor force that is repairing the city walls. Life seems good to me."

"Things are not always the way they might seem. Give me the cloak you are wearing," Ahijah said.

Jeroboam was puzzled by this strange request and even more so after he had given his cloak to the prophet. Ahijah tore the garment into 12 pieces. When he had finished, he handed 10 of the pieces back to Jeroboam.

"I have a message for you from the Lord," Ahijah said to a bewildered Jeroboam. "King Solomon made a serious mistake. He broke his promise of loyalty to God when he began worshipping the false gods of his foreign wives. Therefore, the kingdom will be taken from him."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Jeroboam asked.

"Because soon God will make you king over 10 of the tribes of Israel," Ahijah said, pointing to the cloth he had given to him. "For the sake of David, the Lord will allow Solomon's son to rule the remaining tribes."

And after those startling words, Ahijah left Jeroboam standing alone on the road to ponder them. Everyone in Israel knew that Solomon had married many foreign women so that he could form treaties and trade agreements with their countries. To please all of these wives, Solomon had even built shrines to their pagan gods so they would have a place to worship.

Jeroboam told no one about his meeting with the prophet. In his position as overseer, he soon discovered that many of the laborers were unhappy that they were forced to work on King Solomon's huge building projects. And they had little money left for their own needs after they paid the heavy taxes required to support the king's lavish lifestyle.

Jeroboam began to organize these workers and plan a revolt to overthrow the king. When King Solomon heard about it, he ordered his death. Jeroboam fled to



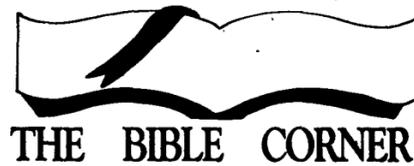
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

an infant, and the adolescent forever an adolescent, and the young adult forever a young adult, so the church, too, passes through stages of life. If it clings unhealthily to one stage, it precludes the possibility of passage to the next.

The Catholic Church of the 21st century will be less clerical, less "religious" (in the sense that there will be fewer vowed members of religious communities in its pastoral ministries), less hierarchical, less male-dominated, and less controlled by custom and routine.

In other words, Catholics of the future will be people who belong to the church because they believe in it, not people who believe in the church because they belong to it.

Is that such a dismal prospect, after all?



Egypt to wait.

Meanwhile, the peace which had existed on all of Israel's borders began to crumble. Some of King David's former enemies prepared to attack the country.

King Solomon died a short time later after serving as king of Israel for 40 years. He will always be remembered for his magnificent achievements and his great wealth. When he forgot the cause of his success and turned to false gods, his act soon became the downfall of the entire country.

After Solomon died, his son, Rehoboam, succeeded him as king. Soon, however, Jeroboam would return from Egypt to claim his promise from God.

Scripture reference: 1 Kings 11.

Meditation: "Yes, I was great, greater than anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem and my wisdom never failed me. Anything I wanted, I got. I was proud of everything I worked for, and all this was my reward. After all this, there is only one thing to say: Have reverence for God, and obey his commands, because this is all that man was created for. God is going to judge everything we do, whether good or bad, even things done in secret." (Ecclesiastes 2:9-10; 12:13-14).



Cliff Hollenbaugh

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