

Self-interest is the real enemy for the church

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated Columnist

In last week's column I engaged in some speculation about the future of Catholic religious education.

In the absence of nuns — at least in the numbers and kind to which we have grown accustomed in the present century — the Catholic Church must look increasingly to the graduates of its colleges and universities to hand on the faith to succeeding generations.

What kind of Catholics will these graduates be, and what kind of faith will they hand on?

I have already reviewed some of the data which indicates that: our Catholic college students today are generally more career-oriented and more concerned about finan-

cial success than were their predecessors; that they come from more affluent homes; and that they are further to the right on the political spectrum.

For example, a still unpublished, confidential survey of graduating seniors at a major Catholic university found that only about 25 percent agreed with the proposition that "to be a fully committed Christian one must be involved in social justice work."

This doesn't necessarily mean that Catholic college students aren't concerned about people in need. On the contrary, there is a remarkably high instance of volunteerism at major Catholic universities like Notre Dame and Boston College.

But the survey of graduating seniors indicates that a disturbingly large minority of

our students (about 20 percent) believes that assisting the poor is more a matter of charity than of justice.

On the other hand, the same survey tends to confirm the impressions of many of those involved in Catholic higher education today; namely, that the students' conservatism on matters of social justice (where their own economic interests are at stake) turns to liberalism on matters of personal morality.

About 60 percent of the students sampled agreed that "It is morally defensible for an unmarried couple who deeply care for each other to have sexual intercourse," and about 55 percent agreed that there are "some instances where abortion is morally defensible."

A 1987 survey of Notre Dame alumni



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

disclosed a similar pattern of increasing conservatism on matters pertaining to the acquisition and use of wealth, on the one hand, and increasing liberalism on matters pertaining to personal morality, on the other.

If present trends continue, i.e., if more and more of our young Catholics have access to quality higher education and if the vast majority of our educated Catholics achieve higher and higher levels of economic success and security, we can expect many of the church's younger members to be increasingly liberal on matters of personal morality and increasingly conservative on matters of social morality.

Consequently, they are likely to endorse and embody for the next generations a spirit of personal freedom, of thinking for oneself when it comes to the acceptance or application of official church teachings on matters pertaining to personal morality and to sexual behavior in particular.

This same critical spirit is also likely to carry over, as it does now, to the church's official teachings on matters pertaining to social justice.

To the extent that, for example, the United States Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the economy doesn't interfere with our graduates' own economic interests, they will give it nodding approval, or what Cardinal Newman called "notional assent."

But to the extent that such teachings do encroach upon the graduates' personal economic turf, they will totally reject, selectively accept, or simply ignore those teachings.

Therefore, the faith that is handed on to the next generations may very well be the reverse of what the present pope and many of the bishops consider orthodox.

Unfortunately, the appeal to freedom of conscience — a positive value in itself — is sometimes used as a cover for moral behavior based on self-interest rather than moral idealism.

Self-interest can lead one to liberal attitudes on matters of personal morality, and conservative attitudes on matters of social morality.

However, if Catholics are to hand on the faith integrally to future generations, it will have to be a "faith that does justice."

An angel of God calls Zechariah

By Cindy Bassett
Courier Columnist

"I'd feel better about going if I weren't leaving you here alone," Zechariah said to his wife as he prepared to depart for Jerusalem. "If only ...," he stopped himself in mid-sentence.

"I'll be fine. It's just for a few days," answered Elizabeth, guessing his thoughts. "Say a prayer for me, too."

If only there had been a child born to them both Zechariah thought as he traveled toward the temple. What would he pray for today? It was far too late in life to pray for this unfulfilled dream. Perhaps he should pray for some other sign of God's favor.

Elizabeth was a good woman, but her lack of a child was seen by some as a reproach from God. Even in their happiest moments together, Zechariah always saw this sadness in his wife's eyes.

Zechariah was still pondering all of these things when he gathered with the other priests of his order to perform his duties at the temple. It was time to choose lots. As

was the custom, someone would be given the honor of burning the incense and offering the prayer on behalf of the people in the inner sanctuary.

Every priest there hoped to be chosen. Some, like Elizabeth, would wait all of their lives for a chance and never be given the opportunity.

"The lot falls to Zechariah," the chief priest announced after everyone present had selected.

A large crowd waited and prayed outside as Zechariah entered the sanctuary. It was a simple task and he felt a great sense of peace as he went about it. The first time he thought he heard someone call out to him, he dismissed it. Who could possibly be calling to him here?

The second time Zechariah heard his name spoken, he looked up and nearly stopped breathing from fright. Even through the hazy smoke of burning incense, there was no mistake in what he saw. A tall man stood just to the right of the altar.



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah," the man said. "God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will have a baby very soon. Call the boy John."

Zechariah was stunned. It was as if lightning had struck him and riveted him to the spot. He couldn't move or speak.

"This child has been chosen by God for a special purpose," the man continued. "John will prepare people for the coming of the Lord."

Lightning had struck twice. A baby was to be born from an old woman and the Messiah was coming! When Zechariah finally found his voice, he asked, "How can this be true?"

"How can you doubt the very things you have prayed about for so many years? I am Gabriel and was sent to you by God with this good news, which will surely come to pass. Because you have not believed, you will be silent until the day the baby is born," the angel said before vanishing as quickly as he had come.

The crowd outside was growing weary of waiting for Zechariah. When he finally emerged from the sanctuary, he made signs and gestures to them because he was unable to utter a single word to them.

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 1:5-25.

Meditation: What is my response to the good news of Jesus Christ?



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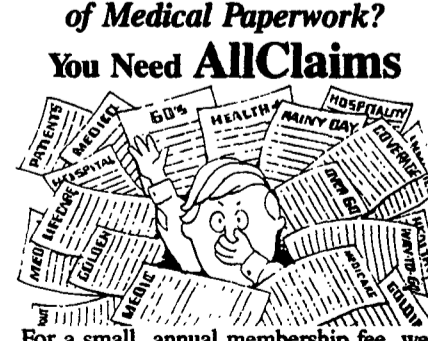
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