

Bishop's reaction points to deeper problem

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The procession had formed at the rear of the chapel. A few nuns, hurrying from their last-minute duties in the infirmary and the kitchen, squeezed past the liturgical ministers and moved quickly to their pews. The organ played softly in anticipation of the grand entrance.

All seemed ready for the Eucharistic celebration that would mark the 25th and 50th anniversaries of religious profession for several middle-aged and elderly members of the community.

But the bishop, standing in his accustomed place at the rear of the line, noticed something out of order.

"Isn't that a woman up there holding the cross?" he asked his assistant.

"Yes, it's one of the sisters," the priest replied.

"Well, she can't be cross-bearer. That's an acolyte's job, and women can't be acolytes," the bishop declared.

"Let me see what I can do, bishop," the priest whispered. And so he went to the front of the procession to convey the bishop's concern.

There was a brief discussion, some movement of nuns back and forth, and then a calm.

When the priest returned to his place at the bishop's side, the bishop had a quizzical look on his face. His head darted from side to side as he strained to gain a clearer view of the head of the procession.

"There's no cross-bearer now," he said, turning to the priest.

"That's right, bishop," the priest replied. "There's no one here to take it."

"(What does he expect?)" the priest must have thought to himself. "This is a convent of nuns, for God's sake! They don't have a reserve supply of young boys to assume acolyte duties on a moment's notice to accommodate a bishop's scruples."

And so the procession moved forward to the accompaniment of triumphal organ music — but with no cross in the lead.

Later in the liturgy, when it came time to pour water and wine in the chalice following the presentation of the gifts, the bishop looked around for the cruets. They were still on the side table.

If a nun wasn't good enough (or male

enough) to carry the cross in procession, then a nun was not good enough to bring the bishop his cruets on demand. And so the nuns let him and his dutiful assistant to fend for themselves.

This is a small scenario which, in itself, doesn't count for much. But it's small things of this sort that reveal most about the sensitivity and even the character of a person.

The bishop in this true story (the dialogue has been created, though it is entirely consistent with what transpired) is one of the "new breed" of bishops appointed in increasing numbers since the departure in 1980 of Archbishop Jean Jadot as apostolic delegate to the United States.

They have been chosen less for their pastoral charisms (in other words, they would never have been elected by their brother priests) than for their unquestioning institutional loyalty.

And so, in this bishop's mind, he was only doing his duty, even though his widely-beloved predecessor would never have taken such a crude action and even though more than half of his fellow bishops would have shaken their heads in em-



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barrassment over such an offensive and utterly unnecessary gesture.

Timid souls, taken aback by forthright and direct criticisms of church officials and policies, sometimes wonder what it is that bothers the critics. They should look to the true-to-life story recounted herein.

Again, it was a relatively insignificant incident (except, of course, for the nun who had the cross taken from her hands and for the community which shared in her humiliation), but it speaks volumes about the mentality that created the incident.

And it speaks volumes, too, it must be said, about the mentality that would regard such a man as qualified, not to say aptly suited, for such a pastorally sensitive appointment.

One of the greatest challenges is its call to exemplify in practice the Good News that we are all one in Christ, equal in human and Christian dignity, male and female alike.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Pope John Paul II echoed those Pauline words in his own first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979): "In reality, the name for that deep amazement at our worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News."

For the sake of that Gospel and the credibility of the church, we need and deserve pastoral leaders who believe it and who practice it.

Debtor failed to learn from king's merciful lesson

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

One day, Peter went to Jesus and asked, "Must I forgive everyone who wrongs me?"

"Yes, Peter, everyone," Jesus answered.

"Suppose this same person keeps on doing things against me?" Peter said. "Our own law says to forgive three times, wouldn't that be enough?"

"Peter, Peter, this thing about forgiveness isn't about keeping track of how many times someone has committed offenses against you," Jesus said. "It has to do with an attitude of your heart."

Jesus called the rest of his apostles around him and explained by telling them a story:

A king summoned all of his servants together to settle up accounts. One man was brought in whose debt was more than a million dollars.

"When can I expect payment?" the king asked.

"Please, I beg you to give me time," the man cried.



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Now the king knew that there was no way that this man could ever earn enough in his entire lifetime to pay off such an enormous debt. So he turned to his officials and ordered: "Sell this man, his wife and all of his children. Then I will consider his debt paid."

"No! Have mercy!" the man said as he fell to his knees. "Be patient with me."

Even the king was moved to pity this man and he changed his mind. "Erase his debt from the records. Your obligation is canceled."

The man was so overjoyed that he went dancing from the palace. On his way home he happened to meet one of his friends.

"You still owe me \$20!" he said to his friend. "I want my money now!"

"I have every intention of making good on my debt," the man answered. "Things

have been rough."

"Oh, no you don't!" the man refused flatly. "Either you pay me up now or you go to debtor's prison until I get my money!"

Some of the king's servants had witnessed this confrontation. They were appalled and reported the incident to their master.

"Bring this ungrateful man back to me at once!" the king ordered.

"I excused your debt, great as it was," the king said to him. "Shouldn't you have shown the same compassion for your friend? You shall be put in prison until every cent is paid back to me!"

Jesus looked from one apostle to the other and asked, "Now do you understand? My Father is willing to forgive all of your sins. But unless you forgive others from the heart, he will not forgive you."

Scripture reference: Matthew 18:21-35.

Meditation: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25).

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