

The new year could be wonderful if only ...

By Father Richard McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, the Catholic Church were to open the ordained priesthood to women and to married people so that we could all concentrate once again on improving the quality of priestly ministry rather than engaging in endless arguments about a priest's gender or marital status?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, right-to-life Catholics were to confound their critics by embracing the U.S.

bishops' consistent-ethic-of-life or seamless garment approach to life issues?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, Catholics who say they are "opposed to abortion, but ..." were actually to give their reasons for opposing abortion so that we might have some clearer idea of the moral ground that separates right-to-life Catholics from their critics within the church?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, Catholics newspaper editors and publishers were to recognize that the church's capaci-

ty to teach with credibility is harmed, not helped, by the suppression of opinion columns with which they are personally uncomfortable?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, Catholics were to learn how to disagree with one another in a civil, not to say Christian, manner, i.e., without questioning one another's faith and without consigning one another to hell?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, conditions — canonical and otherwise — were to change to the point where women



could regard themselves for the first time in history as fully partners in the life and mission of the church?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, a Vatican declaration on human sexuality and marriage were to elicit enthusiastic applause from leading Catholic moral theologians and married couples alike?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, all parishes were truly transformed by a vibrant, effective RCIA?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, a new papal encyclical were to clarify, update, and modify "Humanae Vitae" in such a way as to break 23 years of ecclesiastical gridlock on the birth-control issue?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, there were such a practical reaffirmation of the principle of catholicity in liturgical and canonical policies that every cultural group would feel itself completely at home in the Catholic Church, with all their distinctive traditions and values intact?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, a significant number of bishops were to admit to their brother priests and fellow diocesan ministers that they themselves have had doubts about their vocation, their celibacy, and even their faith from time to time?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, someone were to discover a way to communicate effectively at a popular level the fruits of Catholic biblical scholarship, and thereby help to stem the flow of Catholics (many thousands of whom are Hispanic) out of the church and into fundamentalist sects?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, the Blessed Mother *really* appeared somewhere to remind us that God is to be found in one another and in our coming together for Eucharist, rather than in the heavens or in spinning suns or weeping statues?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in 1991, the Catholic Church itself were to have a year like the world had in 1989 when the Berlin Wall collapsed and the bells of freedom began ringing again all over Eastern Europe?

The Lord is found where he is least expected

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

One Christmas, long ago, an old shoemaker in a certain village surprised his neighbors when they awoke to see that his house had been transformed overnight.

A candle shone brightly in every window of the shoemaker's house. There was a fir tree all decorated in the corner of his living room, where a warm fire burned in the fireplace. And when some of his neighbors went to discover the cause, they smelled wonderful soup bubbling on the stove. Even the shoemaker's table was set for a feast.

The shoemaker was not an unpleasant fellow, but his family had all died and he usually wore an expression of sadness. This particular morning, his face looked radiant.

"What's happened to you?" his neighbors asked.

"I had a marvelous dream last night," the old shoemaker began. "Today is going to be the happiest day of my life. For the Lord told me in my dream that he is going to be my Christmas guest. I am waiting for



him to arrive."

At noon, the shoemaker heard a loud knock at his door. When he opened the door, however, he saw that it wasn't the Lord standing there. It was an old beggar at his doorstep. He was shabbily dressed with worn out shoes.

"Come in," the shoemaker offered. He gave the beggar something to eat. He also found a new pair of shoes and a coat for him.

As the beggar walked away, the shoemaker noticed that the man looked a bit less sad.

The shoemaker went on about his preparations when three hours later he heard another knock at his door. "This must be the Lord!"

Instead, it was an old woman standing there this time. "I'm sorry to trouble

you," she said. "Could I rest here for just a little while? I've been traveling so long."

The old shoemaker placed a chair for the woman right by the fire. He gave her some soup. She told him her troubles.

And when she rose to leave, her face seemed to have lost its loneliness.

At 6 p.m. that night, the shoemaker thought he heard someone crying. When he looked out, he saw a small girl standing at his door with tears streaming down her face. "I'm lost," she sobbed. "Can you help me find my family?"

The shoemaker left his house immediately. It took some time, but he finally succeeded in bringing the child safely back home. The household was filled with great joy after what the shoemaker had done.

It was dark when the old shoemaker walked slowly to his own front door. Suddenly he felt very tired and downcast.

I must have been mistaken about my dream, he thought sadly.

The old shoemaker sat down by the fire and looked around the empty room. "Lord, you promised to be my Christmas guest today. All was ready for you. Why didn't you come?"

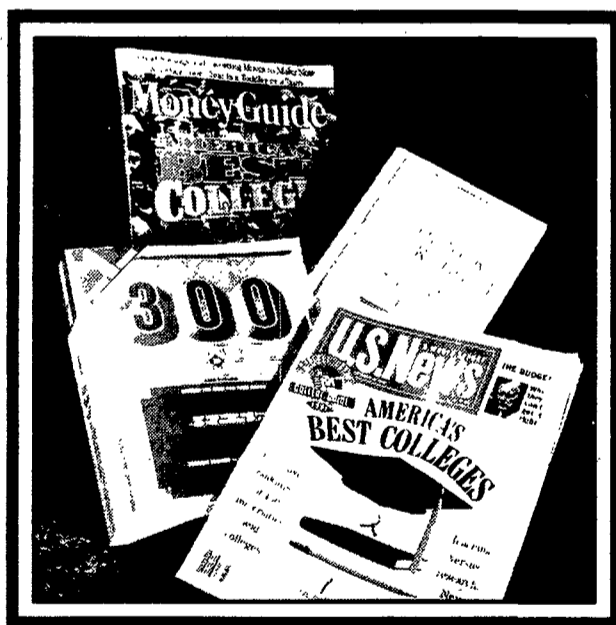
And in the silent room, the shoemaker heard the Lord speak to him clearly in his heart. "I did keep my promise. Three times today I visited your house as your guest. I was the hungry beggar that you gave food and clothing to. And the lonely woman that you spoke kind words to. And the lost child that you helped. For what you did for these three people, you did for me."

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Based on an old Christmas legend.

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