

Spirit of Vatican II faces danger of extinction

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Father David Tracy, a member of the theological faculty at the University of Chicago, pointed out in his book, *The Analogical Imagination* (Crossroad, 1981), that the theologian has three publics: the church, the academy and society.

One of the misunderstandings in the church today has to do precisely with this question of the theologian's public.

Does the Catholic theologian teach, lecture and write for the Catholic Church alone, or does the Catholic theologian also bear some responsibility for fellow academics and especially for the wider civil community as well? If Catholic theology is for Catholics alone, then, of course, we can all do theology as a form of "inside baseball." What other Christians think about it is irrelevant. Non-Christians and non-believers are even less important.

But the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World charged theologians with the task of mediating between faith and culture.

Theologians were "invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of com-

municating doctrine to the people of their times," so that our "religious practice and morality can keep pace with our scientific knowledge and with an ever-advancing technology."

Even as theologians "seek a profound understanding of revealed truth," they must not neglect "close contact with their own times."

If they do so, they will be able "to present to our contemporaries the doctrine of the Church concerning God, humanity, and the world in a manner better suited to them, with the result that they will receive it more willingly."

In order that theologians may "fulfill their proper function," the church must recognize that they "possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence" (n. 62).

If the church is to challenge the sins and temptations of our modern culture, as so many conservative voices have been insisting, it must do so in a manner that is at one persuasive and credible.

This concern is at the heart of the recent statement, "Do Not Extinguish the

Spirit," issued by more than 400 members of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) on the 25th anniversary of the close of Vatican II.

The statement identifies several problems which now endanger the efforts of the church to address the wider culture persuasively and credibly.

At Vatican II the Catholic Church moved away from a heavily centralized church to one in which responsibility is to be exercised primarily at the local level.

And yet the authority and importance of bishops' conferences are being impugned at the highest levels and the role of the local churches is being diminished.

The council also refined the qualities needed for pastoral leadership. Bishops are to be men of pastoral aptitude. They must be open, sensitive to all people, and committed to a collaborative form of ministry. In recent episcopal appointments, the CTSA document observes, "consultation on the pastoral needs of the local church appears to count for little." Safe men are being selected, even if they have little pastoral experience.

The Second Vatican Council was a time of close cooperation between the bishops



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

and their theological advisors. But recent Vatican decrees and the procedures of certain Vatican offices have tended to undermine this spirit of cooperation.

The CTSA statement also touches upon the place of women in the church, pointing out that "many women and men are struck by the contrast between the role taken by women in our society and position assigned to them by current church teaching and practice."

There is, in fact, an anti-feminist mentality abroad. No one, for example, can be appointed a bishop unless he is unequivocally opposed to the ordination of women, and statements on marriage, sexuality, and family life speak of the woman's role "almost exclusively in relationship to motherhood."

We have fallen behind also in the area of ecumenism. The results of all those ecumenical dialogues since Vatican II have been "underutilized." Underutilized is an understatement.

King Zedekiah paid for failing to listen to the prophet's warnings

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"King Zedekiah, I come here with important news concerning our enemies, the Babylonians," the chief army officer said and paused.

"Bad news or not, tell me," the king said as he sensed the officer's reluctance.

Ebedmelech, the king's official, stood nearby-listening. He wondered if the king would become incensed if the news was not good. For years, he had seen the prophet, Jeremiah, come and stand before King Zedekiah with messages from God.



Jeremiah had been beaten and imprisoned for these messages.

The chief army officer cleared his voice nervously. "King Nebuchadnezzar is preparing his army to march on Jerusalem. His forces plan to surround the city."

If the news had upset him, the king's

next statement did not reveal those feelings. "What do you suggest we do?" he asked calmly.

"I have already prepared my men to do battle," the chief army officer said rather proudly. "We wait only for your command to begin fighting."

King Zedekiah turned instead to Ebedmelech to reply. "Go at once and find the prophet, Jeremiah," he said.

The chief army officer's face became flushed with anger. "Why do you even consider consulting that prophet of doom and gloom! Jeremiah will do nothing but

dishearten the troops," he said.

King Zedekiah shook his head. "Still he is a prophet of the Lord. I must see if Jeremiah has a message concerning our present circumstances," the king said.

Jeremiah was surprised at being summoned to the palace. For years he had preached about what would happen to the people because of their refusal to obey God's laws.

"Why do you bother with these stiff-necked people?" Jeremiah cried out to God. "I have told them again and again how displeased you are with their idol worship. And yet they continue."

But even now, the Lord commanded the prophet to go to the palace and give King Zedekiah another message.

"You will not be able to defeat King Nebuchadnezzar," Jeremiah said flatly as he stood before both the king and his chief army officer. "Your only hope is to surrender to these Babylonians. If you refuse, Jerusalem and even the temple will be destroyed by them."

"Surrender! What did I tell you?" the chief army officer shouted to the king. "This man should be put to death for speaking such rubbish!"

King Zedekiah said nothing when the officer seized Jeremiah and led him away. For his part, Ebedmelech followed at a distance.

When they reached the outskirts of the city, they stopped by an old well. "Throw Jeremiah down there," the chief army officer commanded. "We have a war to fight."

Ebedmelech rushed back to the palace. "Jeremiah is a prophet of God! If he isn't already dead, he will starve to death down in that well."

"Take some men back with you," King Zedekiah relented. "Pull Jeremiah out of the well."

At first, Ebedmelech thought that Jeremiah was dead. But when he discovered that the prophet was stuck in the mud at the bottom, he lowered ropes and carefully brought him up.

A short time later, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem. They burned down the city and destroyed the temple. When King Zedekiah refused to surrender, the soldiers blinded him and led him away back to Babylon to serve as a slave with the rest of the people.

Scripture reference: Jeremiah, Chapters 37-39.

Meditation: Killing the messenger does not change God's message.

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