

Church abides with tension of mission work

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The pope's new encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* ("Mission of the Redeemer"), has already suffered a bit of criticism — sight unseen — because it was released virtually coincident with the outbreak of war in the Middle East.

Critics have charged that the document's

stirring call for a renewed missionary effort to convert Muslims to Christianity can easily be misinterpreted at this time.

Thus, when the pope demands in his encyclical that Muslim nations "open doors to Christ," those nations may hear echoes of medieval popes dispatching the crusaders to recover the holy places and bringing the infidels to their knees.

The timing of the encyclical's release cannot now be changed. But what can be said of the fundamental issue it addresses?

The pope is concerned that in the aftermath of the Vatican II's emphasis on dialogue with, and respect for, non-Christian religions, a lessening of missionary fervor within the church may occur.

A few theologians have suggested that

Jesus puts to rest Peter's fears about the future

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

When John the Baptist's followers complained that Jesus was gaining many followers, John told them: "If he is to become greater, I must become less."

This Lent, we will examine concerns that prevent Jesus Christ from becoming greater in our lives.

Peter sighed as he hauled the fishing nets from the Sea of Galilee back into his boat.

"Empty," he said aloud. Even so, his arms strained with the effort. He had worked two nights with no sleep and made not a single catch for all his effort.

Maybe he had been foolish to think he could make his living from the sea. So far, Peter had only ensured for himself a meager existence and an uncertain future.

Where was his brother, anyway? Andrew was supposed to be his partner. If last night's work had yielded a huge catch, Peter doubted that he would have been able to handle it alone. How would he survive?

The boat was nearing the shore when Peter saw Andrew waiting on the beach. Even before Peter had landed, Andrew rushed into the chilly water to meet him.

Peter envied Andrew's carefree attitude.



They might be brothers, but they were as different as the moon and the sun. Peter was a somber realist with one eye fixed anxiously on the future. Andrew was an impetuous dreamer.

"Peter, you'll never guess what happened!" Andrew exclaimed.

"It must have been something," Peter said flatly. "Why else would you have left me to take care of our business alone?"

Andrew was undaunted. "I have found the Messiah!" he announced proudly.

"And is this messiah going to make the payments on our boats?" Peter asked.

Andrew became so downcast at the question that Peter softened. "I'm a bit on edge this morning. There's not been a single fish for two days," he said. "Besides, I thought you were a follower of that baptizer fellow."

"It was John the Baptist who pointed Jesus out. He said: 'There is the Lamb of God, the one I've been telling you about,'"

Andrew said. "So we went with Jesus. That's where I've been for the past two days. You should hear what he told us!"

Andrew looked up as the brothers towed the boat onto the beach. "Peter! There he is! There's Jesus!" he shouted.

The man stood a couple of yards away. If this were the Messiah, Peter thought, his kingdom must be a simple one.

After Andrew introduced Jesus to his brother, Jesus told Peter, "Cast out your net again."

"I've been out there all night," Peter argued. "I assure you, there's nothing out there to be caught."

It was utter foolishness to Peter, but at Andrew's urging he threw his net back into the sea. Soon Peter called for help. The net was so heavy that 10 men were needed to haul it in.

Peter fell to his knees at Jesus' feet once they had brought in the catch. "Master, leave me. I am a sinful man," he said.

"Don't be afraid," Jesus told him. "From now on, you will catch men."

Scripture reference: Luke 5:1-11; John 1:32-43.

Mediation: If Jesus is your master, how will you live?



the days of the traditional missionary apostolate are over. They believe our task as Christians is no longer to convert non-Christians, but to open channels of conversation with them, to collaborate with them on matters of common concern and to accept them as a permanent part of the religious landscape.

The pope fears that this orientation may be leading to a new form of religious relativism and indifference that would regard all religions as equally good. Thus Christianity would no longer be seen as the one, true religion, nor would the Catholic Church be seen as the one, true church within the family of Christian churches.

But if the Holy Father really expects Catholic missionaries to gain their lost initiative, he surely must be aware of the formidable — perhaps even insurmountable — cultural, political and legal obstacles they face at this time.

In most Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the public practice of Christianity is prohibited by law and so, too, is any effort to convert Muslims to Christianity. A Muslim who does convert to Christianity is subject to severe penalty.

Even in Saudi Arabia, which American men and women are risking their lives to defend, the public practice of Christianity is illegal. Saudi authorities will "look the other way," but they expect their defenders to be exceedingly discreet.

What, then, is the church to do? Discontinue dialogue and concentrate on evangelization? Or acknowledge defeat in the area of evangelization and engage solely in dialogue?

It is significant that the pope himself doesn't pose the issue as an either/or matter. He doesn't say we must choose between the path of dialogue and the path of evangelization and conversion.

"Inter-religious dialogue," he writes, "is a part of the church's evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission to the nations."

And he reaffirms the council teaching that God is also present and at work in non-Christian religions, as the source of their own spiritual riches.

On the other hand, the promotion of dialogue and the recognition of God's presence in these other religions do not detract in any way "from the fact that salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization."

We must live, then, with the tension. To choose dialogue over evangelization, or vice-versa, is to destroy the tension and thereby to betray the mission of the church.

Pastoral ministers know the need always to be patient with people who are in seemingly irreparable canonical or moral situations. They know that compassion, understanding and some measure of accommodation are needed, not harshness, rigidity or exclusion.

Good ministers make progress when and where they can; they exercise patience and forbearance when and where they cannot.

The same must be true of the church.

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