

# Church should recast sexual teachings

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

A former president of a major Catholic university is fond of saying that, if he were pope, he would impose a five-year moratorium on church pronouncements concerning sex.

Another nationally prominent priest reports that he is "more deeply glad each day that the church's pelvic preoccupations are really totally foreign" to the important work he is doing now.

What is there about the church's official approach to human sexuality that can exasperate even its most accomplished and committed members?

Surely, they don't deny that sexuality is a proper subject of moral analysis and teaching.

After all, human sexuality has to do with relationships, and relationships are a matter of fundamental concern to Christian morality: our relationship with God and our relationships with one another.

Indeed, our relationships with one another are determinative of our relationship with God, which is to say that human relationships are sacramental in character.

"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you

did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

If human relationships are a sacrament of our relationship with God, and if sexual expression is a principal form of human relationship, then sexual expression, too, can be sacramental in character.

Sexual expression can signify the gracious presence and creative love of God, but not always.

Sexual expression may be healthy or unhealthy, nurturing or manipulative, life-giving or destructive, generous or self-centered, enriching or exploitative, depending upon the character of the people involved and the circumstances of their relationship.

If the foregoing is true, why do so many Catholics prefer that the church should fall silent on the matter of human sexuality?

Is it because the church's teachings lay too much stress on negative prohibitions ("Thou shalt not...") and not enough on the positive aspects of healthy sexual relationships?

Is it because these teachings focus too much on the purely biological nature of

sexual acts?

Is it because these teachings are formulated by celibate men who lack an experiential awareness of the fuller interpersonal context of sexual relationships?

Even when most members of the church agree with a given teaching, as in the case of abortion, one detects a certain resistance to the manner and form in which the teaching is presented.

But there are also many Catholics who have no sympathy whatever for the "resisters."

These teachings, they insist, are fine as they stand. They need only be proclaimed more clearly and more forcefully. If they should still meet resistance, it is because of the selfishness and sensuality of the hearers.

This is a comforting analysis for some because it lays the problem completely at the other's doorstep. For them, the church should just keep saying and doing what it has been saying and doing all along.

But if the Spirit is present and active in the whole church and not only in its official teachers, we have to take into serious account the way in which the official teachings are actually received.

As the church approaches the end of a century and the dawn of a new millennium,



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

no greater challenge looms before it than that of rethinking and recasting its teachings on human sexuality in a way that is faithful to the Gospel but also intelligible and persuasive to their intended audience.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have shown the way in the dialogical process they employed in the drafting of their two pastoral letters on peace and the economy.

That path will not be an easy one to follow, however. Much opposition exists to what our bishops did in those two instances — opposition not only to the content of their letters, but opposition especially to the process by which those letters were drafted.

That opposition surfaced again over the bishops' proposed pastoral letter on women (there were specific objections to including the testimony of women in the document), and in reaction to the listening sessions on abortion conducted last year by Milwaukee's Archbishop Rembert Weakland.

# Readings lay out challenging decisions

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 6:60-69; (R1) Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18; (R2) Ephesians 5:21-32.

Decisions run through Sunday's readings. Joshua says to the tribes of Israel, "Decide today" (R1). Marriage is a decision (R2). Our Lord said to the twelve, "Do you want to leave me too?" (R3). Religion, too, is a matter of choice. It is an invitation, and one can choose it or not.

Yet one person can influence another person's choice as Joshua and Peter did. In the family, the greatest influence comes from the parents. Chemists tell us that a single drop of iodine will color 7,000 times its weight of water. A single word or act by parents affects the entire lives of their children.

If family prayer, Bible reading, love of the Mass, and grace at meals can be found in the home, you will never be able to take it out of the child. The apple does not fall

far from the tree.

The readings offer another lesson: that of the necessity of "stick-to-it-tiveness," of persevering. We all know boys and girls who were brought up in the Catholic faith and have left the church. We know adults who have drifted away from the church, who have decided not to serve the Lord God, or who have broken away and no longer remain in the company of Jesus: How sad and tragic.

The marathon we know as life is hard. The obstacles are many, and just because we are Catholics does not mean that the way will be made smooth for us. We get cancer and suffer from heart attacks, strokes and diabetes. We watch family members suffer. We lose our jobs. We grieve the loss of loved ones. During times such as these, we need a faith that does not cave in.

One of the great secrets in life is not how we begin, but how we finish. In the 1990 Tour de Trump, an 11-day bike race, a little-known Soviet amateur held the lead for seven days. He took the lead on the

third day and did not relinquish it to any of the more experienced professional riders until the next-to-last day. At one point, he had a 12-minute advantage over the second-place cyclist.

But this young rider found himself more than 30 minutes behind by the last day of the race. In the end, he finished far down in the pack. The important thing is not how we start, but how we finish.

Judas started well and the good thief started badly.

Many of us are good starters. With talent and enthusiasm, we start off with a burst of well-doing. But sustaining that beginning is the problem. That's true in our commitment to Christ, to our marriage partner, in our work and in a host of other endeavors. How are we finishing?

Theatrical producer Arthur Hopkins used to receive dozens of manuscripts for plays. Before he would read any script, he always asked, "How is your second act?" He realized that many new playwrights had wonderful first acts, but allowed the dramas to fade and the plots to drift in the lat-



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

ter parts of their plays. There is always a second act, though, and it must be just as impressive as the first.

That's the test of any commitment in life. Can we maintain our intensity, our loyalty to Christ and the church when the enthusiasm fades, the passion cools and the numbers drop off?

Faith has to do not only with how we start, but where we finish. Our Lord said, "Remain faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life" (Rv. 2:10).

One way to keep the faith is to say our prayers devotedly. During the Hail Mary we say: "Pray for us now and at the hour of our death." Mary always listens to her children. If you pray to her daily, she'll see that all will be right at the hour of death.

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