

Church not listening to 'real majority'

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Many years ago prominent sociologist Peter Berger pointed out that a social-scientific perspective "transforms a world which we are taught to take for granted into one that is very questionable indeed."

In an article in the Sept. 21 issue of *America* magazine, Father Andrew Greeley, a professor of social science at the University of Chicago and a well-known writer, draws upon some fresh social-scientific data to challenge a few taken-for-granted ideas about the state of the U.S. Catholic Church ("Who Are the Catholic 'Conservatives?'").

He observes that Catholics on both sides of the liberal/conservative divide seem to take it for granted that the Catholic "restoration" has been successful and that "conservatives" now have momentum on their side.

Father Greeley offers four sets of conclusions that conflict with such assumptions.

- The conservatives are not winning. Apart from some of the elite conservative groups, the Catholic conservative population in the United States is both aging (average age of 60.8 as opposed to 40.5 for other Catholics) and fundamentally at odds not only with mainstream America, but with mainstream Catholic America as well. This is especially true with such is-

sues as race and gender.

While the Catholic "restoration" of the past decade has had a very profound impact on the ecclesiastical institution (especially through the appointment of a certain type of bishop), the "restoration" has had little impact on the life of the typical U.S. Catholic.

For example, in 1978, the year Pope John Paul II was elected, 23 percent of U.S. Catholics regarded premarital sex as always wrong. By 1989 the percentage had dropped to 18 percent — "a statistically significant decline," Father Greeley notes. Views on abortion have remained about the same.

"The 'conservatives' may dominate the institution," he argues, "but the institution now has little impact on U.S. Catholic life. They may fire theologians, ban speakers, harass priests, write letters to Rome, but their lay neighbors pay no attention to them and are not likely ever to do so."

- The conservatives tend not to be the "good" Catholics they claim to be. On the basis of available research, Father Greeley finds in them "a propensity to racism" and a "strong propensity to sexism."

Catholic conservatives are twice as likely as the rest of the Catholic population to favor laws against interracial marriage, more than twice as likely to frown on working mothers, and three to four times as likely to think that women should subordinate their careers to those of their

husbands.

Father Greeley puts the matter bluntly: "the Catholics the church has been able to hold in orthodox sexual attitudes tend to be both racist and sexist."

- The conservative element in the church is small. On the basis of patterns of answers on three normative items (no birth control for teens, no premarital sex, and no legal abortion), he concludes that only 7 percent, or one out of every 14 Catholics in the country, could be described as "conservative."

And yet many bishops continue to take seriously the complaints and demands of this tiny minority. These bishops' activity and behavior are "devoted to reassuring this element, in part to keep the Vatican happy but also in part because of a gut feeling that the articulate conservatives represent a vast 'silent majority' of U.S. Catholics." The real silent majority, Father Greeley insists, "leans very much in the opposite direction."

"By identifying with a small minority of Catholics ... the leadership has cut itself off from any meaningful influence on the vast majority."

- The "restorationist" strategy that the ecclesiastical institution is currently following doesn't seem to be working and may even be counterproductive, as recent events in Poland would suggest.

The hierarchy is not likely to win back



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

the large majority of the faithful to traditional positions on sexual morality, and certainly not by simply repeating commands and prohibitions. The laity, Father Greeley points out, have "a built-in resistance to the idea that the leadership has the right to issue orders in this area of human behavior."

Lay people are still open to persuasion, but Father Greeley suggests that persuasion is "an art at which historically (the hierarchy) has never been very adroit."

His overall conclusion is of some pastoral importance. The result of this growing gap between hierarchy and laity will not be empty churches but deaf ears. "When the leadership starts speaking, the sound systems go off," he observes.

But it is not true authority that Catholics reject. On the contrary, they are hungering for it. They reject only authoritarianism.

How to move from authoritarianism to authority is what Eugene Kennedy once called "the problem with no name."

We had better find a solution soon.

Ambition can breed unhealthy rivalries

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:35-45; (R1) Isaiah 53:10-11; (R2) Hebrews 4:14-16.

A favorite children's book is *Hope for the Flowers*. It's a story about two caterpillars, Stripe and Yellow.

After he was born, Stripe ate and ate. After awhile, he thought there must be something more to life than this. So he went in search of satisfaction. One day he came to a column of caterpillars, each crawling over the other, climbing, pushing, squeezing, crushing, trying to reach something at the top of the column. But the top was so far up in the clouds that Stripe couldn't tell what was up there.

But everybody else was struggling so hard to get to the top, so Stripe thought whatever was there must be awfully good. So he plunged into the pile. He kept push-

ing, stepping on the other caterpillars and being stepped on himself. It was a caterpillar-eat-caterpillar world.

After many days and many bruises, Stripe met Yellow, another caterpillar caught in the climbing rush. They fell in love. For a moment they forgot their struggle and, finally, they decided to give it up altogether. Down they came from the madding throng, and crawled into a beautiful meadow by themselves. It was so much quieter and happier there. They lived in love. For a while it was like heaven.

As time passed, however, Stripe became restless. He hankered to know what was at the top of the mountain of caterpillars he had forsaken. Yellow begged him to be content, but he could not. Finally, he left Yellow to begin again the struggle up the mountain of caterpillars. Yellow was heartbroken.

One day she saw a caterpillar hung upside down, caught in some hairylike stuff.

Yellow thought he was in trouble, but the caterpillar told her, "No, my dear, I must do this to become a butterfly."

Yellow's heart skipped. "What is a butterfly?" she asked.

"A butterfly is what you are meant to become. It flies with beautiful wings, drinks nectar from flowers, carries the seeds of love from one flower to another. Without butterflies there would be no flowers," the upside-down caterpillar replied.

Yellow was enthralled. "How can I become a butterfly?"

"You must give up being a caterpillar?"

"You mean I must die?" asked Yellow. "Yes and no," he said. "You seem to die, but you rise again to new life."

The other caterpillar taught Yellow how to go about becoming a butterfly. Yellow was afraid, but she so wanted to get to Stripe, high up the mountain of caterpil-



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

lars, that she took the risk. She spun her cocoon and emerged a butterfly.

Happily, Yellow flew to the mountain of caterpillars in search of Stripe. She found him, high up, haggard and worn. She caught his eye, and Stripe saw the love in her eyes. He couldn't believe she was flying. He realized now there was more to life than climbing. He wandered off to where he and Yellow had enjoyed such happy days. And he fell asleep.

When he awoke, Yellow was there, fanning him with her wings. She told him to climb a tree. He seemed to know what to do. He spun his cocoon. Yellow waited. And one day Stripe flew to her side.

The Gospel might be labeled: "Every man for himself." James and John wanted top spots. Ambition blinded them for a moment to what they were really meant to be. They thought being on top was greatness, as though position makes a person.

Ambition breeds violence and unhealthy competition. And it will reign if we forget what God means us to be — lovers, servants and givers, like Yellow.

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