

# Church, state meet on moral ground

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Pope John Paul II's recent 10-day pastoral visit to Brazil raised anew the question of where to draw the line between religion and politics.

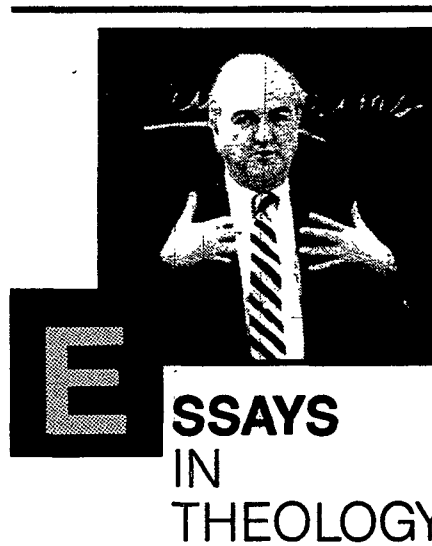
On the one hand, the Holy Father delivered pointed criticisms of the Brazilian government for favoring big landowners over impoverished peasants, in a country where 2 percent of the landowners control 57 percent of the arable land, while the poorest 30 percent of the landowners share only 1 percent of the land. The pope called for agrarian reform.

On the other hand, he went out of his way to insist that his mission and that of the church are purely "religious and spiritual." Indeed, he warned Brazil's priests and bishops that they should "not become political leaders."

There seems to be a mixed message here. Why?

The message appears to be mixed because the Holy Father believes as deeply in a traditional understanding of the priesthood as he does in the social teachings of the church (to which his own three major encyclicals have contributed so much).

Thus, he is appalled by injustices in the political, economic, and social order, but is troubled at the same time by the thought of priests leaving their sanctuaries to stand with the people in the dirt and dust of



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human reality.

Because the papal message seems to be mixed, different audiences hear what they want to hear.

Socially active bishops and priests hear the pope's warnings against political involvement, and applaud vigorously in agreement.

To be sure, everyone must be for justice. But what that means in particular circumstances, they insist, should be determined by political and business leaders. The church and its clergy are not competent in that area.

It was just this sort of mentality that led one neo-conservative commentator to imply a couple of years ago that Archbishop Romero and the six Jesuits who were murdered

in El Salvador had only themselves to blame, because they had somehow "politicized the Gospel."

Well, whose side is the Holy Father on? Does he really expect the church's pastoral leaders to be concerned with specific political and economic issues like agrarian reform, or is he content to have them enunciate only the most general principles of morality and leave the specifics to the politicians and the business establishment?

As usual, it's not an either/or matter. It's both/and.

In his Oct. 14 meeting with the Brazilian President, Fernando Collor de Mello, Pope John Paul II set forth the following guideline: "The objectives of the church in its purely religious and spiritual mission and those of the state pertaining to the common good are certainly different. But they coincide in one point: humanity and the well-being of the country."

His words were entirely consistent with Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: "In their proper spheres, the political community and the Church are mutually independent and self-governing. Yet, by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings" (n.76).

Although religion and politics are two different and independent spheres, they overlap and meet on the common ground of morality.

Both are concerned with justice, human rights and peace, which are moral issues in their own right, independently of politics and religion.

To be sure, morality is codified and reinforced by religious faith, but it does not spring exclusively from faith. Even non-religious persons have moral convictions, because the natural law is "written in their hearts" (Romans 2:15).

Morality is also codified and reinforced by the legislative, executive, and judicial processes of the state, but morality is not determined by those processes.

That state can only legislate and enforce what society wants at a particular time. As the moral consensus in society changes, so do its laws.

Thus, not until a change occurred in society's moral estimation of segregation did the legal system of segregation come to an end. The same would apply to abortion.

Such changes are often achieved through the combined efforts of political and religious leaders, working together on the common ground of moral concern.

Accordingly, the pope did not contradict himself in Brazil when he declared that, although priests and bishops should not become political leaders, the church must be active in the struggle for agrarian reform.

In the end, it is not a matter of politics, but of morality. More precisely, it is a matter of morality *within* politics.

# The Hebrews' faith grows one day at a time

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"More trouble?" Moses asked his brother when he saw his anxious expression.

Aaron sighed. "All I hear as I go through the camp is grumbling! It's been nearly two months since we left Egypt. Provisions are running low."

"Well, were the people expecting a banquet table out here in the wilderness?" Moses snapped with impatience.

Aaron hesitated. "Moses, they are a simple people. When their stomachs are empty, they forget all about a promised land they haven't seen."

"And they also are quick to forget all of the miracles the Lord performed on their behalf," Moses added. "A day doesn't go by when I'm not sorry I am the leader of this murmuring, faithless lot!"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Aaron.

"Call a meeting for this afternoon," Moses said.

As soon as his brother had left the tent, Moses sat down and poured out his heart to God. After he finished his long list of grievances, he

asked: "What should I do now with your people?"

When at last Moses was silent, he heard the Lord speaking to him: "I want the people to learn to trust me, one day at a time. That is the only way they will build up their fragile faith. And, Moses, don't take it so hard when the people grumble. It's not you they are speaking against, it's me."

That afternoon, Moses went before the Hebrews and gave them God's commands. "No, God did not release you from your slavery to Pharaoh to let you die now in the desert. Our God will provide for all of our needs as we journey to our new home. But, first, you must learn to trust him one day at a time.

"Tomorrow morning," Moses continued, "go out and gather the food that you will see on the ground. But collect just enough to eat for one day only."

When the people came out of their tents early the next morning, they saw a thick layer of dew on the ground. When it evaporated, a thin flakelike substance remained.

"Someone try it and see what it tastes like!" a few people suggested.

"It is sweet like honey and very good," those who tasted the sub-

stance told the others.

The Hebrews decided to call their food manna, and they eagerly gathered it from the desert ground every morning.

Despite Moses' instructions, some of the people took more manna than they needed for that day because they were afraid of going hungry. The next morning, the leftover manna was covered with maggots.

"When will you people learn to trust God?" Moses shouted at them. "You are only to take enough for one day, except for the sixth day of the week. Then you are to gather for two days so that you will have enough for the Sabbath day of rest."

On the sixth day, the people obeyed Moses' command. And the leftover manna for the Sabbath meal was fresh the following day and did not spoil.

It took the Hebrews 40 years to reach the Promised Land. But they never went hungry for a single day. Every morning — except for the Sabbath — when they went out of their tents, they found manna sent by God.

Before they left the wilderness, the Lord told Moses to save a portion of the manna. So Moses placed some manna in a jar as a testimony



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of God's faithfulness for all generations. Eventually, manna was put into the Ark of the Covenant, where it never spoiled.

Scripture Reference: Exodus, Chapter 16.

Meditation: Jesus said: "I am the Bread of Life! When your fathers in the wilderness ate bread from the skies, they all died. I am that Living Bread that came down out of heaven. Anyone eating this Bread shall live forever." (John 6:48-51).

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