

## Are there politics in the church?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnists

No words are more stubbornly resisted when applied to the church than "politics" and "political." The church, we are told, is supernatural. It is above politics.

Yes and no. Yes, the church is supernatural. No, the church is not above politics.

The church is supernatural because it is the creation of God, and God dwells and acts within it. This is another way of saying, as the Second Vatican Council did, that the church is a mystery, or sacrament.

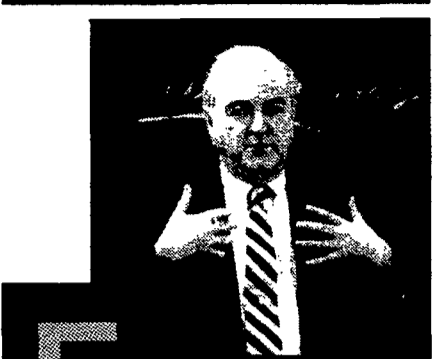
But because the church is a mystery, or sacrament, it is at the same time divine and human, just as Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is both divine and human.

It would be as serious an error to deny the church's humanity as to deny its divinity. In its humanity the church is political.

The church is political not only in the sense that it speaks out on public policy issues like war and abortion and tries to have some impact on legislative, executive and judicial decisions, but also in the sense that the church has its own governmental structure and its own intramural conflicts over the conferral and use of power within that structure.

The word politics touches each of these levels of meaning. It applies in the first instance to the affairs of the city, or the public forum (its root is the Greek word, *polis* for "city").

Since the church is an integral part of the world, as the council's



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World insisted, it is inescapably involved in public affairs, at least insofar as public issues have a moral dimension.

To be involved in the public affairs of the world is to play a political role in it.

Secondly, politics has to do with the art and practice of government. To "enter politics" is to enter the realm of public service, to engage oneself in the workings of government.

The church itself has a governmental structure. One can find clearly defined offices in the church, with clearly defined jurisdictions. And there is a whole detailed process by which individuals are appointed to, or removed from, those offices.

One need only skim the table of contents of the Code of Canon Law to appreciate how highly complex the church's political structure really is.

Thirdly, the word politics applies to the process of acquiring and using power.

Political power is the capacity to influence and even to mandate behavior, often under threat of punishment. One has power over others if one can cause them to do or not to do something.

Because of its tremendous potential for good or for evil, it is a matter of some importance who exercises power and how they acquire it. Both the exercise and the acquisition of power are political in nature.

We're all familiar with the expression, "It's not what you know; it's whom you know that counts." That expression reminds us that politics has an unseemly side to it.

Candidates for public office often make bargains with potential rivals in order to gain their support. And once in power, they sometimes appoint less qualified, or even unqualified, people to public office because they had contributed money to their campaign or because they are friends.

That's what terms like "wheeling-and-dealing," "patronage," and "cronyism" refer to.

As difficult as it is for some Catholics to accept, politics exist in the church even in this third sense, and even in its occasionally unseemly aspects. The church is, after all, human as well as divine.

Politics has been involved in the election of popes, and not only "once upon a time." Those who may find this hard to believe know little about the history of the church.

Politics is also involved in the selection of bishops and even in the making of saints, as Newsweek religion editor Kenneth Woodward has shown in his book of that title.

The proposed beatification of Opus Dei's founder, Monsignor Escriva is not the first such event to have a political spin to it. Religious orders have always regarded it as a matter of immense community pride to have one of their own, particularly a founder, added to the list of saints.

Canonization confers status, prestige and legitimacy on an order or congregation, and so it spares no expense or effort to achieve it. (Because they lack such backing, relatively few lay people have been canonized.)

Opus Dei, only recently established as a personal prelature, is acting no differently in pulling out all the stops to secure the beatification and eventual canonization of its founder.

The fact that the controversy surrounding his beatification may seriously divide and harm the church is apparently of no immediate concern to Opus Dei and its supporters. They have the power, and that's politics.

Such power, on the other hand, is only temporary and fleeting. Only the reconciling, life-giving power of God endures.

## Sins against the First Commandment

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

Father Thomas Paprocki of the Archdiocese of Chicago is a priest and a lawyer, which puts him in a unique position to reflect on the question of morality in the workplace.

In a speech he gave recently entitled *Ethics in the Everyday Practice of Law*, Father Paprocki suggested that lawyers — and by extension all workers — take another look at the Ten Commandments as a way of reflecting on the morality of their work.

According to Father Paprocki, the First Commandment offers an important insight into work: "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall love no other god but me."

Father Paprocki points out that it is the God who brought the Jews out of slavery that we must love. "If we make anything else our god," he declares, "we subject ourselves to the condition of slaves."

What does this mean in today's

workplace? As Father Paprocki says, if our hearts are set on such things as income, clout, connections, powerful positions, or prestigious offices, we will be caught in a vicious trap. Since there's always more money to be made, more power to be garnered, and another big shot's favor to be curried, our very freedom becomes shackled to our own distorted priorities.

We Americans who have just lived through the greedy '80s ought to take some time to reflect on whether or not we as a nation have been worshiping some other god than the one who brings us out of slavery.

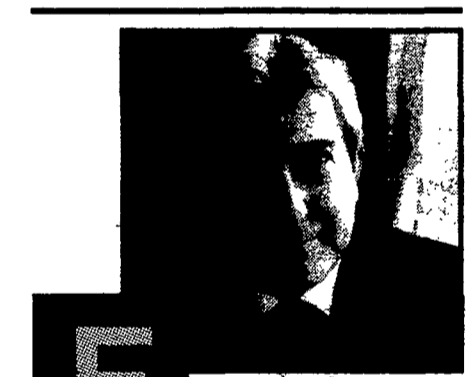
How much of today's recession, for example, has been the result of the work of corporate raiders whose only concern was liquidizing assets for short-term profit? Who were these buyout "experts"? A significant percentage of them surely would describe themselves as "good" Christians. Wouldn't it have been so much better — wouldn't it have made you proud — if Christians had stood out for our refusal to participate in such activity or,

better yet, for leading the fight against it?

Sins against the First Commandment are not just limited to corporate raiders. Many American workers have lost a sense of pride in the quality of the goods they produce or the services they perform. Their paychecks, their benefits and their working conditions have become their gods.

Other workers, on the other hand, make their work itself their god. They derive their identity, their sense of fulfillment, the very meaning of their lives from their jobs. In this context, then, "workaholic" can be seen to be a sin against the first commandment, since it makes something other than the God of freedom from slavery the most important thing in one's life.

Parents, too, can break the First Commandment if they let their jobs take precedence over their responsibilities to their children. The myth that children need only a little "quality time" from each parent is certainly contrary to the spirit of loving, extravagant God, the original parent.



### FAITH AND WORK

If we are to obey the First Commandment in the workplace, shouldn't we be careful to worship the one true God, the one who leads us out of slavery to material values, even if that God is not currently all that popular in our society?

This is the first of 10 columns exploring morality in the workplace in the context of the Ten Commandments.

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