

# Czech priests deserve better

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has recently ordered some 300 priests in Czechoslovakia to cease exercising their ministries.

These are the so-called underground priests who were secretly ordained — with the knowledge and approval of the Vatican — during the years of repressive Communist rule. It is estimated that about 80 priests are married.

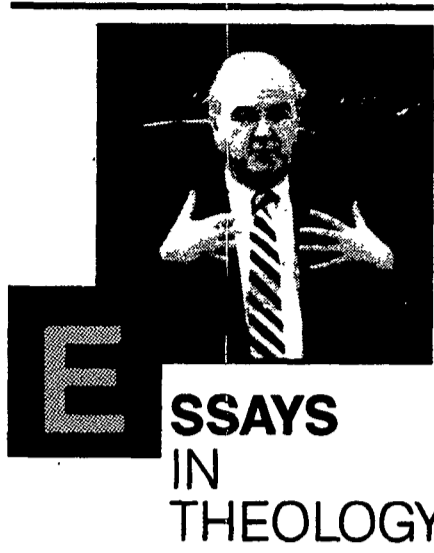
The decision was outlined in a pastoral letter that was read in churches throughout the country. The Vatican thanked the priests for their sacrifices, but said that a "double priesthood" — one celibate, one non-celibate — could no longer exist.

It was suggested that the priests who married before ordination might seek acceptance in one of the local Eastern-rite churches, which are in union with Rome and which have a married clergy, or else work as deacons in the Catholic Church.

Those priests who had not married were told they could apply for formal ordination, following a period of testing and additional training, if necessary.

At the same time, however, the Vatican confirmed the validity of all the sacraments administered by the underground priests during the period of Communist repression.

Well, almost all. Persistent, and



apparently reliable, reports have stated that a few women were also ordained for the underground church. The Vatican made it plain that their sacramental activities were invalid.

Not surprisingly, the Vatican's decision has provoked strong criticism, disappointment, and pain among the ranks of the underground priests. According to a report in *The New York Times*, many of the affected priests say they are being treated shabbily after years of personal sacrifice.

Rumblings have also been heard outside their ranks. An officially ordained Czech priest — a leading dissident during the Communist regime — expressed the fear that

the Vatican's decision could lead to a "growing mistrust and even a split" among his few Catholics.

What is to be said about all this?

In the absence of a full Vatican text, one has to be cautious about drawing conclusions based on media reports, even when those reports appear in so highly respected a newspaper as *The New York Times*.

Key words used in the April 12, 1992 *Times* story are not canonically precise. When *The Times* says that the Vatican has "revoked the status" of the 300 underground priests, what does that mean?

Have the priests been laicized, or has a canonical prohibition been placed on the exercise of their priestly ministry in the Latin-rite Church?

If, as is more likely, we are dealing here with a prohibition rather than a blanket laicization, is the prohibition only temporary for the unmarried priests, but permanent for the married priests, at least as far as the Latin-rite is concerned?

When *The Times* reports that the unmarried priests could apply for "formal ordination" after a period of testing and possible further training, the confusion is compounded.

If the Vatican has already recognized the validity of the secret ordinations as well as the validity of all the sacraments administered by these priests (except for the women), on what grounds would the Vatican insist on a second, conditional ordination — if that's what

the adjective "formal" suggests? (The adjective has no canonical meaning in this context.)

The Code of Canon Law stipulates that a conditional ordination may occur only after a "diligent investigation" fails to remove a "prudent doubt" about the validity of the initial ordination (Canon 845, paragraph 2).

But whatever the precise canonical dimensions of the Vatican's action, one can ask even now if the decision is pastorally prudent.

And when the full story of the courage and heroism of these priests — married and unmarried alike — is finally told, won't the decision seem even more incomprehensible?

Some will ask if the Vatican had placed its need for administrative control and its concern for the preservation of clerical celibacy ahead of the legitimate rights of the priests and the pastoral wisdom of the church in Czechoslovakia.

They may also point out that in the terrible years of Communist domination some Eastern European churches were allowed to practice their faith openly and without risk to life, as in Poland.

In other countries, like Czechoslovakia and Albania, priests literally risked their lives in the exercise of their ministry.

The underground priests of Czechoslovakia who did so and survived are living martyrs of the faith. They deserve better.

# Jesus gives us a new commandment

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 13:31-35; (R1) Acts 14:21-27; (R2) Revelation 21:1-5.

Alexander Dumas and a friend once had a severe argument. It got so out of hand that they challenged each other to a duel. Fearing both would be killed in a duel — the two were superb marksmen — they decided to draw straws instead. Whoever drew the shorter straw would then pledge to shoot himself.

Dumas was the unlucky one. He drew the short straw. With a sigh, he picked up his pistol and trudged into the library and closed the door, leaving all his friends who had come to witness the duel outside.

In a few moments a shot was fired. All the curious pressed into the library. They found Dumas standing with his pistol still smoking. "An amazing thing just happened," he said. "I missed."

So many Christians have missed the Gospel. They know the Ten Commandments — the "Thou shalt not's" — but seem to have missed the Eleventh and most important commandment: "Thou shalt."

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." The commandment is new in the sense of different and better than the old commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

The measure of the new commandment is "as I have loved you." He loved us when we were His enemies, and He loved us unto death on a cross.

In the Greek text, the words used for love — all three times — is *agape*. So Jesus was not speaking of romantic love (*eros* in Greek), nor of parental love (*storge*), nor of friendship's love (*philein*).

His love (*agape*) has little to do with feeling or emotion. His love was a will act, a mind-set to overcome hostile relationships. It may end with feelings, but it doesn't start with them.

Therefore, it has little to do with linking another individual or finding him or her attractive, fascinating or exciting. It has more to do with removing barriers and seeking as much good for another as for oneself.

The nature of the scorpion is to sting, the nature of God is to love.

Jesus is telling us that we can exchange the scorpion's nature for God's nature. In doing this, we may assist others to lay their stingers aside.

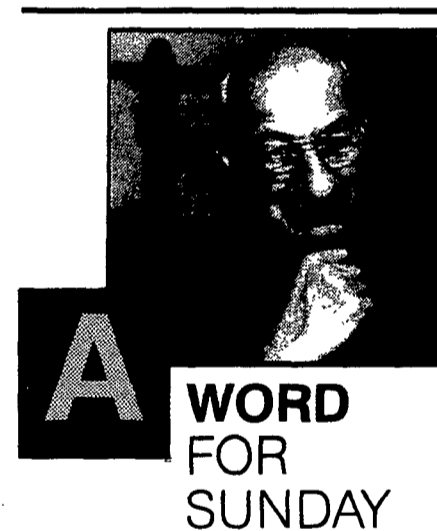
Jesus' words "love one another as I have loved you," were not a sweet little suggestion. He was giving an order. "A new commandment I give you."

A commandment is a mandate, a duty. It isn't an option. A commandment is a requirement. You do it or else. Since his kind of love is a will act, it can be mandated, just as sorrow for sin. Jesus did not say like one another, but love. Liking deals with feelings, but love with the will.

Lucy stands with her arms folded while Charlie Brown pleads, "Lucy, you must be more loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place in which to live!"

Lucy whirls around angrily, causing Charlie Brown to do a backwards flip and screams at him, "Look, blockhead — the world I love. It's people I can't stand."

Some people are like that. They are street angels and home devils. After spending a lifetime study-



ing and writing about human history, historian-philosopher Will Durant distilled more than 2,000 years of history into three simple words: "Love one another."

"If you take an attitude of love toward everybody you meet, you'll eventually get along," he said.

But better still, if you love even the unlovable, all men will know you are Jesus Christ's disciple. And, knowing this, they too will be drawn to the Master.

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