

Live in present as if future were here

Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Following a lecture in Kansas City, Mo., several months ago, I was asked if I had any "strategies for survival" between now and the 21st century, when the prospects for further renewal and change may be more promising than today.

A local priest wrote a few days later to remind me of my answer: first, live in the present as if it were already the future; and, secondly, fear not.

He suggested that these strategies have vast implications and expressed the wish that I could have said more. He asked if I had written any articles on the subject.

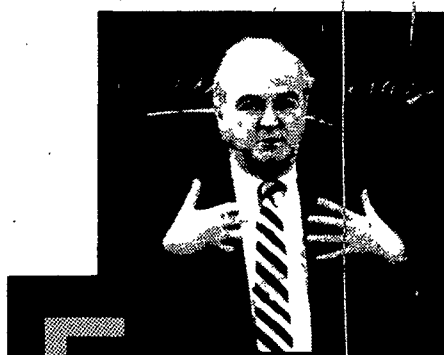
I have not. This week's essay is a first, exceedingly sketchy, and patently inadequate attempt at one.

To begin: "survival" from what?

Some recent developments in the church seem to be moving us in reverse, as if someone had pushed the "rewind" button on the ecclesiastical videocassette recorder.

We notice renewed attempts at glorifying the ordained priesthood at the expense of the laity's dignity and ministry. One has only to listen to bishops' homilies at ordination ceremonies or to consider the restoration of the monsignorate in some dioceses.

In spite of our new consciousness of women's dignity and equality in the church, some bishops have circulated letters reminding pastors of the prohibition against girls serving at the altar.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

And although the Index of Forbidden Books was abolished in 1966, its spirit has been revived in the Vatican's recent reaffirmation of rules governing censorship and the granting of ecclesiastical permission to publish. It also can be seen in some dioceses and in the practice of striking Catholic textbooks and authors from the list of approved catechetical resources.

Most Catholics aren't directly touched by developments of this sort, even if they are active enough to attend church weekly, contribute to the support of their parish, and send their children to religious-instruction classes or to a Catholic school.

They simply don't have much interest in the latest Vatican document or in what the bishop is saying or doing —

unless he threatens to close a school.

Questions about "strategies for survival" come instead from that hardy minority of Catholics who are deeply engaged in the life of the church — religious educators, social service and health-care ministers, journalists, teachers, pastors and pastoral associates, and so forth.

Such Catholics are affected by what is said and done, allowed or prohibited, by the pope, the Vatican, their bishop, and/or their pastor.

If the lives and ministries of these Catholics are made more difficult and discouraging thereby, they want to know what they can do about it — short of abandoning their ministry or leaving the church.

The first "strategy for survival" I proposed was to live in the present as if it were already the future.

Women, for example, should act now as if their baptismal dignity and ministerial equality were already acknowledged.

They should take pastoral initiatives and assume leadership roles that are consistent with their gifts and with the call of their faith-community.

True leaders are people who are trusted and respected by those whom they would lead. Trust and respect, however, aren't conferred by appointment or summoned up on command. Unlike sheer power, leadership is something that one earns.

I don't mean women should preside at clandestine liturgies before church law allows it, but they should

do about everything short of that.

Of course, they will face opposition from unsympathetic clergy, and also some from lay people — including other women who remain wedded to the cultural mentality and religious traditions of the early 20th century.

The second strategy for survival, however, is as important as the first: fear not.

Meaningful change will never happen if we passively accept the way we ourselves and our ministerial roles are defined by others who have never adequately understood, much less accepted, the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

Freedom, we must remember, is an interior, spiritual quality. A person under external constraint can still remain an authentically free person.

The reverse is also true. Although free to come and go as we please, we can be imprisoned nonetheless by a false consciousness that leads us to believe we can't or shouldn't do something that is entirely appropriate for us to do, or to believe another has the right to define and determine for us our own human and Christian identity and destiny.

The only legitimate fear for a Christian is the fear of God, but in the biblical sense of the word; namely, a readiness to do God's will.

Doing God's will often requires courage, sometimes even a form of martyrdom.

So does living in the present as if the future were already here.

No one can take salvation for granted

Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

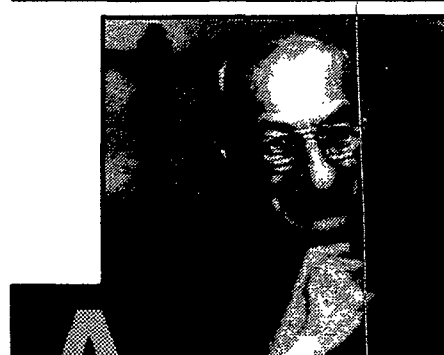
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 13:22-30; (R1) Isaiah 66:18-21; (R2) Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13.

The theme of Sunday's readings is salvation's universality. God wills that all people be saved, not just His chosen people. "I come to gather nations of every language," God said through Isaiah.

How will this be done? "I will send fugitives to the nations: to Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands."

Who were these fugitives? God's people, dispersed by both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. What a light Tobit was to the Assyrians. And Daniel, Esther and Nehemiah to the Babylonians and Persians.

The Gospel repeats the same theme of salvation's universality. "People will come from the east and west, from the north and the south, and will take their place at the feast of the kingdom of God." Our Lord probably said this in response to the irrelevant question: "Lord, are they few in number



WORD FOR SUNDAY

who are to be saved?"

The book of Revelation seems to imply that two-thirds of mankind would be saved. St. Paul noted that where sin abounded, grace did more abound. Christ's redemption is more powerful than Satan's temptations.

The man, however, who asked the question about the number to be saved was not talking about himself,

for he was a Jew. Therefore, he would be saved, no doubt about it — so he thought. It was about the Gentiles that he was speaking: would many of them be saved, he wondered?

Our Lord shocked him with the answer, "Don't be so sure about yourself. Don't take your salvation for granted. Rather, try to come in through the narrow door."

First, our Lord said "try" — which in Greek means to "agonize, struggle hard, keep striving." A danger we can run into is to cease trying. Like the chosen people, Catholics can delude themselves into thinking that once believers, that's the end of it. They've arrived. No need to strive. Yet a saint is a sinner who keeps trying.

Once the devil tempted Don Bosco to take it easy and not work so hard. The saint retorted, "I'll rest when you do." We can never rest, because our enemy does not rest. Living the Christian life is like rowing against a fast-flowing stream. If you stop rowing, you will be swept back.

Another point our Lord brought out is that heaven will bring many surprises. "Some who are last will be first,

and some who are first will be last."

St. Augustine once said that we'll be in for three surprises when we get to heaven. First, we shall not see people there who we thought would most certainly be there.

Secondly, we shall see people there who we thought would never make it.

And thirdly, the biggest surprise of all will be to find that we are there — Amazing Grace!

Four kinds of pride exist: face, place, race and grace. The worst is the last. To think we've got it made and don't need try to come in the narrow gate. "I have come," Jesus said, "not to call the righteous, but sinners."

The important thing in life is striving. That was the theme of Tennyson's inspiring poem *Ulysses*. No matter the achievement, man must always struggle onward and upward.

"How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnished, not to shine in use! / As though to breathe were life! ... Death closes all; but something ere the end, / Some work of noble note, may yet be done, ... 'Tis not too late ... to sail beyond the sunset ... but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

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