

## Bias against women is in retreat

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Some of the bishops who voted for the defeated pastoral letter on women last month argued that, whatever the document's flaws, it provided an opportunity to lay out the church's case against women's ordination.

But as presented in the letter, it is a weak case, and the 110 bishops who voted "no" may have saved their brothers from further public criticism over it.

The document appeals, first, to an argument that at least has the merit of being clear and concrete; namely, that there is an "unbroken tradition in the churches of the East and West of calling only men to ordained priesthood."

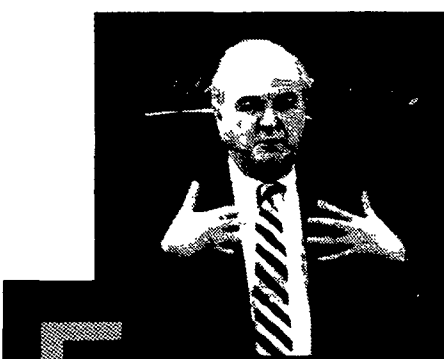
However, the letter assumes, without evidence, that because the church has never ordained women to the priesthood in the past, it must be because God forbids it.

The letter appeals, secondly, to an argument that is, by contrast, complex and abstract; namely, that the priest is "a sacramental symbol of Christ."

"The sacrament," the bishops assert, "relies on the natural symbolism of gender to signify the relationship between the priest and Christ, the head and the bridegroom of the church."

Priests and bishops "represent Christ as shepherd of the flock, as head of the mystical body and bridegroom married to the church..." The pastoral letter proposes that only men can "represent" Christ in this way.

(A New York auxiliary bishop,



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Austin Vaughan, proclaimed during the debate that a woman has as much chance of becoming a priest as he has of having a baby.)

But the New Testament offers no support for such assertions. No mention is made of individual Christian priests, other than of Christ himself, who alone is our high priest (Epistle to the Hebrews).

The community as a whole, women included, is spoken of as a priestly people (1 Peter 2:5, 9), but nothing at all is said about the church's individual members exercising a priestly role.

Bishops are mentioned in the New Testament, but they are not referred to as "bridegrooms of the church," "shepherd(s) of the flock," or "head(s) of the mystical body." On the contrary, Jesus refers to his apostles in one instance as "sheep" (Matthew 10:16).

Christ alone is the bridegroom (Mt 9:15), the shepherd (John 10:11), and the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). If the New Testament also recognizes bishops as "bridegrooms," it is only because they had wives (1 Timothy 3:2).

And even if one can say that priests and bishops in some way "represent" Christ, it does not follow that whatever can be said of Christ can be said also of priests and bishops.

Christ is divine, but no one would dare assert that, because priests and bishops "represent" the Lord, they are also divine.

Furthermore, even if masculine words like "bridegroom" and "shepherd" could be applied to priests and bishops, they have to be understood analogously. After all, Christ was not literally a shepherd. He was a carpenter. Nor was he literally a bridegroom. He was celibate.

Because these terms were only analogously applied to Christ, the gender argument doesn't work. Even if it can be said that a priest is "like" a bridegroom, it doesn't follow that only males can be priests.

Otherwise, we should have to argue, on the basis of the New Testament's explicit references to the church as a "bride" (Ephesians 5:24, 32), that only women can be church members.

Soon after the publication of the Vatican's "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" in 1976, this century's most distinguished Catholic theologian, the late Karl Rah-

ner, SJ, offered a critique ("Concern for the Church," chapter 3).

The "tradition" to which the Vatican declaration (and the pastoral letter) appealed, Father Rahner wrote, cannot automatically be regarded as "absolutely and definitively binding ... since there is obviously a purely human tradition in the church which offers no guarantee of truth even if it has long been undisputed and taken for granted."

In other words, an uninterrupted tradition isn't necessarily divine in origin. It may only be a culturally conditioned practice and, as such, subject to change.

If we keep this in mind, Father Rahner argues, "then we can say confidently and with adequately certain historical knowledge that in the cultural and sociological situation at the time, Jesus and the early church could not in practice have considered and still less set up any female congregational leaders or presidents of the eucharistic celebration ..."

The Fathers of the Church and later theologians who fashioned more arguments against women's ordination did so, Father Rahner points out, on the basis of a culture and philosophy that "enormously depreciated" women.

Although our bishops have explicitly renounced any anti-female bias in their own "case" against women's ordination, that bias continues to permeate many of the world's cultures and even much of the church's.

But fortunately it is a bias in retreat, not in ascendancy. Someday Bishop Vaughan will have his baby.

## Workplace is fertile ground for ministry

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

They came representing some 40 different institutions in 25 different cities, with a multitude of different problems and programs. Yet these 53 church professionals and volunteers had much in common as they recently spent a day in Chicago discussing "Ministering to Downtown Workers."

Organized by the National Center for the Laity, the workshop was the first attempt to bring together those people from around the country — primarily Catholic, but also others — who see their primary focus as providing ministry to those who work in downtown areas.

Some people were from traditional downtown churches, such as Ss. Peter and Paul's in Detroit, Old St. Mary's in San Francisco, and St. Mary's in Rochester. Others represented more specialized ministries such as the Labor Guild and St. Anthony Shrine in Boston, the Center for Spirituality and Work in Austin, and the Center for Ethics and Corporate Policy and the U.S. Catholic Bookstore in Chicago. Also present were offices for the laity



### FAITH AND WORK

and family life, Newman centers, a retreat ministry, Catholic community services, two publishers, several religious orders and Opus Dei.

What held this diverse group together was their experience with workers. Each had been struggling — some for many years and often in isolation — with the issue of helping people make the connection between their Christian faith and their daily work.

They spent the day exchanging models and strategies, comparing successes and failures, and brainstorming new ideas.

Father Jack Wall, for example, pastor of Old St. Patrick's in Chicago, shared the three elements he felt have been successful in transforming his parish from a dying congregation of only four people into one of Chicago's most vibrant churches: hospitality, quality liturgies, and a focus on the adult experience of faith.

Sister Joan Sobala, SSJ, of Rochester, described the Downtown Community Forum sponsored by St. Mary's in Rochester, which brings people of many faiths together around a variety of societal and workplace issues.

Father John Hurley, CSP, of St. Mary's in San Francisco, talked about his personal outreach to the managers of the many hotels downtown. One manager, a Muslim, noted that Father Hurley was the first minister of any denomination to make an effort to introduce himself.

Father Norm Douglas of St. Martha's in Akron runs Heart to Heart Outreach, a network of support groups for such diverse occupations

as attorneys, counselors, educators, police chiefs, journalists, doctors, bankers, students, business people, homemakers, laborers, nurses, government workers ... even clergy.

Issues that these "downtown ministers" encounter include helping workers in coping with loneliness; making career transitions; balancing various responsibilities; integrating family, work and spiritual life; upholding the values of justice and honesty; and discovering the meaning and value of their work.

The problems of the urban's poor and homeless, the unemployed and the elderly, and alcohol and drug addicts are also among these ministers' daily concerns. They are grappling especially with how to get the marketplace to respond in a Christian and effective way to these problems.

We can all be thankful to these pioneering men and women for the good work that they do in ministering to other workers. Perhaps their example will call more church institutions to recognize that the workplace — downtown, rural, suburb and home — is a legitimate and fertile ground for ministry.

*Faith is the substance  
of things hoped for,  
the evidence of things  
not seen.*

Hebrews 11:1

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