

The church evangelizes by example

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Some Catholics complain that too much attention is devoted to controversies in the church and too little to matters of real spiritual importance.

Why, they ask, is there so much harping on issues such as papal authority, the appointment of bishops and their lifestyle, the ordination of women, the rights of church employees, clerical celibacy, abuses in the priesthood, and the vocations crisis, when the church's real point and purpose is to preach the Gospel and to guide people to eternal life?

It's a question that deserves an answer.

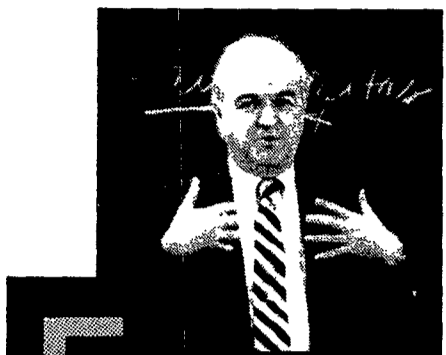
The problem with it is its underlying assumption that concern with issues of controversy is tantamount to a lack of concern for the church's spiritual mission. To focus on the first is to ignore the second.

But that is not the case. On the contrary, the two sets of concerns are radically intertwined.

Pope Paul VI reminded us in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, that the "first means" of evangelization is "the witness of an authentically Christian life."

"Modern men and women," he declared, "listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses ..."

It is, therefore, primarily by its conduct and by its life that the church will evangelize the world, in other words, by its living witness of fidelity



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

to the Lord Jesus — the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity" (n.41).

Four years earlier, and with the approval of the same pope, the 1971 Synod of Bishops issued a document titled, "Justice in the World," in which the bishops pointed out that "anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."

For that reason, the church "must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the church itself."

"Within the church rights must be preserved. No one should be deprived of their ordinary rights because they are associated with the church in one way or another" (chapter 3, paras. 2 and 3).

The document gave specific examples:

1. Those who are employed by the church, including clergy and religious, "should receive a sufficient livelihood and enjoy that social security which is customary in their region."

2. Lay people "should be given fair wages and a system for promotion." Furthermore, they "should exercise more important functions with regard to church property and should share in its administration."

3. Women, in particular, "should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the church."

4. Every member of the church has a "right to suitable freedom of expression and thought. This includes the right of everyone to be heard in a spirit of dialogue which preserves a legitimate diversity within the church."

5. When church members "are accused of some impropriety, a "judicial procedure should give the accused the right to know his or her accusers and also the right to a proper defense."

6. Church members "should have some share in the drawing up of decisions" in accordance with the rules given by Vatican II, "for instance with regard to the setting up of councils at all levels."

7. With regard to temporal possessions, "it must never happen that the evangelical witness which the church is required to give becomes ambiguous." Indeed, "our faith demands of us a certain sparingness in use, and

the church is obliged to live and administer its own goods in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed to the poor. If instead the church appears to be among the rich and the powerful of this world, its credibility is diminished."

The U.S. Catholic bishops drew on that very section of the synodal document "Justice in the World" in writing their own 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy."

Two of the specific examples they gave had to do with the right of church employees to form labor unions and the obligation of bishops not only to recognize that right but also the right to "bargain collectively ... through whatever association or organization (church employees) freely choose."

The pastoral letter also warned explicitly against "the continuing discrimination against women throughout the church and society ..." (para. 353). These and other rights are stipulated in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, canons 208-231.

What is at issue here, once again, is the principle of sacramentality. Because the church itself is a sacrament, it must always externally signify what it is internally; namely, the presence of God.

Whatever obscures that invisible reality harms and undermines the church's spiritual mission.

In the words of Paul VI, it is "primarily by its conduct and by its life that the church will evangelize the world."

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