

Prelate's letter poses challenge

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The first draft of a pastoral letter by Milwaukee's Archbishop Rembert Weakland is currently in circulation. It's titled, "Catholic Identity: Claiming the Tradition in Our Day."

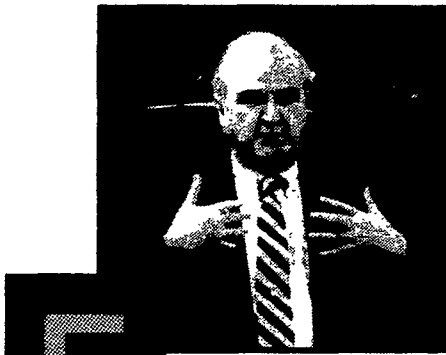
The pastoral letter will appear in its final form later in the year to mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Milwaukee diocese.

Archbishop Weakland is employing the open, consultative teaching-style recently adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops in the drafting of their own national pastoral letters. He is inviting suggestions and requests for clarification as well as criticisms, with the assurance that such comments will be taken into serious account in the final drafting stage.

Although much excellent material can be found throughout the document, I was particularly struck by its closing appeal for mutual respect between Catholics of differing viewpoints.

Citing Pope John XXIII's call for an updating of the church at Vatican II, Archbishop Weakland acknowledges that such a process is "often very painful, especially if one is full of fear that the substance might change."

"The more conservative voices in the church," he writes, "remind us that not all updating is truly such but can be also a distortion of the tradition. Only when we understand the church's tradition and its history



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

deeply are we able to make such judgments.

"More liberal voices," he continues, "become impatient that the church does not respond quickly enough to the needs of the times. They are eager to move ahead."

It is at this point that the archbishop shows himself at once balanced and fair-minded, unlike his strident critics.

"Although it is painful in the church at times because of the lack of dialogue between these groups, they are both necessary for growth. The conservative voices force the more liberal to examine deeply the roots of a practice before changing it. The more liberal voices keep the church from becoming stagnant and force it to be constantly re-examining its positions

and the grounds for them.

"Such a dialogue," he concludes, "must always be held in an atmosphere of respect and mutual trust, guided by a will to respond to the Holy Spirit if it is to be fruitful. I hope that during this year we will be able to sustain just such a dialogue on the nature of Catholic identity and not alienate those on either side of the spectrum."

Archbishop Weakland's appeal finds an echo in a lecture Father Avery Dulles, SJ, has been giving at home and abroad for the past three years (first delivered at Fordham University in December 1989 and published in the Jan. 27, 1990, issue of *America* under the title, "Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue").

One of its most recent versions was presented this past October as the inaugural lecture for Father Dulles' first-semester course on Catholicism in American Society at the American College in Louvain, where he has been visiting professor in the American College Chair for the Study of Religion and Values in American Society.

His concluding remarks were similar to those of Archbishop Weakland, but more pointed: "It is healthy and proper for there to be tensions and arguments in the church, but it is scandalous for Catholics to impugn one another's motives and integrity, as many are now doing.

"Unless we have clear evidence to

the contrary," Father Dulles continued, "we should assume that other Catholics are sincere believers, seeking to serve God and the church."

"It may be that the liberal or traditionalist, the neo-conservative or the radical to whose views I am most vigorously opposed may have the very word that God intends for me here and now.

"We must all keep our ears open, therefore, and be slow to judge."

Father Dulles has more credibility with Catholic conservatives inside and outside the hierarchy than does Archbishop Weakland. One hopes they will take his words to heart.

Archbishop Weakland's pastoral letter, however, may pose an even greater challenge to his counterparts on the right.

If it is possible for him to make a conciliatory gesture to the other side, why is it not possible for bishops more conservative than him to make the same kind of gesture to liberal and progressive Catholics?

Why can't each side say it needs the other, if only to keep itself honest and alert?

If passages similar to those in Archbishop Weakland's first draft or in Father Dulles' lecture have also appeared recently in pastoral letters coming out of archdioceses such as Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, Mobile, Ala., New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Ore., or Washington, D.C., I should welcome evidence thereof.

One can always hope.

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