

The church can learn from GM

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

A highly publicized management study taken back in the 1950s favorably compared the Catholic Church with General Motors. Still bearing the scars of inferiority from their immigrant past, U.S. Catholics were proud. Non-Catholics were impressed.

But General Motors is in big trouble today, and so are other corporate giants such as IBM and Sears. A Feb. 8, 1993 *Newsweek* article about the companies' plight was titled, "The Fall of the Dinosaurs."

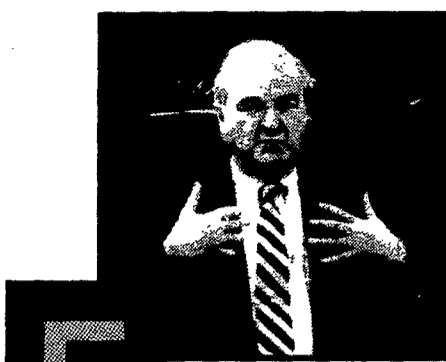
The chairman at IBM and Westinghouse have resigned under fire, and the head of American Express followed them into the "executive hall of shame."

Meanwhile, Delta Airlines has reported massive losses, and Boeing has announced more layoffs. Sears, an old American standby, stunned the nation by closing its century-old catalog business and then threw 50,000 jobs over the side.

A few years ago these corporations were at the top of the list of America's "blue-chip" companies. Owning stock in any one of them conferred financial status and security. Not so today.

Some older companies such as AT&T and Motorola saw the wave of change before it crashed over them. Unlike the dinosaurs, they swiftly adjusted to it and have prospered.

According to *Newsweek*, it's that distinction that infuriates the laggard firms' shareholders. American



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Express' CEO, blamed for that company's decline, nevertheless tried desperately to hold onto power. Outraged shareholders — and a falling stock price — forced him out.

One survivor has said success is a direct result of employees' involvement in a company's fate. But that happens only when employees know everything that management knows — down to financial statements.

This approach is in striking contrast to the style adopted by the major corporations during most of this century. They were big, centralized, and hierarchical.

IBM was a model in which employees had to conform to strict rules — including salesmen in black suits — in exchange for lifetime employment. By the 1960s the captains of industry

believed there were no limits to growth.

The Catholic Church followed a similar course. Like IBM salespeople, its own front-line personnel were required to conform to strict rules of dress: priests in black cassocks and women religious in traditional habits. Many new religious houses and seminaries were constructed around the same time — only to close or be sold off 15 or 20 years later.

"But when times began to change," the *Newsweek* article pointed out, "big organizations were breeding grounds for complacency."

They ignored the signs of the times. Competition was heating up and becoming global. Technological change was swift.

Wang Laboratories saw its business vanish almost overnight because it failed to acknowledge and respond to the personal computer revolution.

At the same time, customers became more discriminating and more demanding, giving their business to companies that took the time and the trouble to find out what they really wanted. Toyota listened, and gave customers a smaller, fuel-efficient car; GM did not, and continued to churn out gas-guzzling battleships.

According to *Newsweek*, the 1990s is the decade when the so-called soft stuff — listening to employees and customers — finally gets taken seriously. The old top-down military model is being replaced by teamwork (what we Catholics call "collaborative ministry"). Where that's not happen-

ing, companies are on the road to extinction. Like the dinosaurs.

One must resist the temptation to reach for the sledgehammer. The comparisons between the business world and the church are too obvious.

IBM, GM, Sears, and others thought there would be no end to their dominance and power. Where else could the customer go? They found out, but too late.

Why were they caught off-guard? Because they didn't take their customers and their own employees seriously. The executives knew best.

Had they listened, they wouldn't have heard anyone telling them to get out of the automobile business or to stop making computers — any more than today's Catholics would tell their own hierarchy to stop preaching the Gospel, celebrating the sacraments, teaching the faith, or ministering to the sick and the needy.

But they would tell them to do it differently: to open the priesthood to married men and to women, to accord women a truly equal place in the church's life and ministries, to welcome those who feel unwelcome, to open channels of communication with the rank-and-file and to open the books to everyone.

GM was sure that the American consumer's interest in smaller automobiles was a temporary fling, that they'd come back to the big car in time. GM was wrong. It misread the signs of the times.

There's a clear lesson here; do we really need a sledgehammer to see it?

Restriction causes dilemma for parish

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Here is one for all you Solomons out there.

Recently a woman tried to register her granddaughter for kindergarten at a parish school. Because of the large number of children in the parish, the kindergarten classes were limited to parishioners' children only.

This grandmother is an active member of the parish, but her daughter — the pre-schooler's mother — is not. The younger woman had her child while still in high school, the father disappeared, and she returned home with the child to live with her parents.

The grandparents have assumed some of the responsibility for caring for the granddaughter, including her religious practice and education. The



FAITH AND WORK

little girl's mother, while remaining personally somewhat disaffected from the church, has allowed her own

parents to raise the child Catholic. She even agreed to allow them to register her daughter in the Catholic school.

When the grandmother went to sign the girl up for kindergarten, however, she was told that it was the mother — not the grandparents — who must be registered in the parish. The little girl would not be eligible to enter the kindergarten unless her mother became an active member of the parish.

Now, although most parish schools charge a special "non-parishioner" rate, many accept students whose parents are not members of the local church. This seems fair enough, since most Catholic schools are subsidized from parish funds. In this case, however, the ban on non-parishioners in the kindergarten is absolute (because of space).

The argument can be made that if

the mother really wants to have the child attend Catholic school, she should be willing to become involved in the parish herself.

Yet it is the grandparents who are overseeing the child's religious education, and they are longtime members of the parish.

What in this case is the loving thing for the parish to do: to insist that the mother become active in the parish if her daughter is to go to the parish school, or to accept the participation of the grandparents in the child's upbringing and recognize their membership in the parish as covering the child?

If you've got a solution, write to me care of this newspaper.

(P.S. What if letting this little girl into the school meant that another parishioner's child couldn't be accepted?)

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