

How would Jesus judge us today?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Many in the church dislike others judging them.

They resent the media's dwelling on clergy's sins.

They grow weary under the weight of feminist criticisms.

They recoil against theologians who call into question doctrine's conventional interpretations.

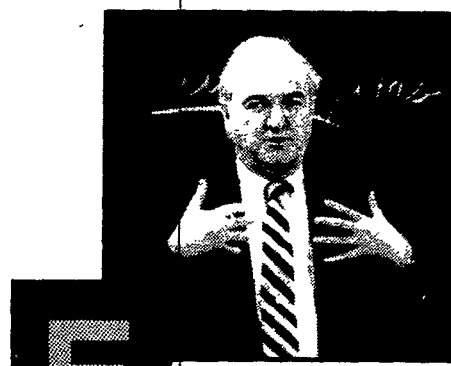
They are perturbed by polls and surveys that disclose gaps between the hierarchy and the rank-and-file.

They wonder why things couldn't return to "normal" — the way they remember them (or imagine them to have been) in the placid 1950s when people tingled with excitement at the sight of cardinals in flowing robes processing up the middle aisle; when cops tipped their hats to priests and saluted bishops; and when women religious were secure behind convent walls by night and behind ample habits by day.

If such a world ever existed, one has to accept the fact that it's gone, never to return.

Even so, the new age of open criticism shouldn't be all that disturbing. People only criticize what they take seriously. That should be a slight comfort to the thin-skinned.

Besides, the media, women's groups, theologians, and assorted laity aren't the final judge of what's



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

right and what's wrong with the church. Jesus is the judge.

Many readers are familiar with the question, "If Jesus came back to earth today, would he be happy with what he'd find in the church?"

One can, of course, quarrel with the question, because Jesus has never left us.

He is present, first of all, in God's people.

He is present in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

He is present in the Word of God, preached, taught, and prayerfully read.

He is present in the church's ministers, called forth to represent Jesus to

the community and to the world.

But the question still has a point to it. It really means, "If we were to judge today's church by the standards that Jesus himself set for his original community of disciples, would the church pass or fail the test?"

We could cite many passages in the New Testament from which we could draw pertinent criteria, but given the limitations of space, we shall focus here on the famous 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus was addressing the crowds and his disciples regarding the leadership of the Jewish religious community, the scribes and the Pharisees.

He criticized them, first, because "they do not practice what they teach." They lay "heavy burdens on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."

They like to have "their deeds ... seen by others," and "love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi."

But Jesus was only getting warmed up. His words turned to rhetorical fire as he hurled a series of woe-to-you's at the religious establishment.

He called them "hypocrites" for locking people out of the kingdom of heaven, and for dwelling on the tiny requirements of the law while

neglecting the "weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

He dismissed them as "blind guides" who "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!"

They "clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." They are like "white-washed tombs."

They praise all the prophets, now safely dead, when, in fact, they would have murdered them if they had been alive at the time. Indeed, they are "descendants of those who murdered the prophets."

Jesus' criticisms, in fact, were so pointed and so true to their mark that the leaders conspired to have him put to death.

Throughout his public ministry — in his preaching, his teaching, especially in parables, his healing, and his personal witness — Jesus made it unmistakably clear what true religion is all about.

On the one hand, it is about love, compassion, understanding, kindness, mercy, justice, forbearance, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, humility.

On the other hand, it is not intolerant, self-righteous, vindictive, unforgiving, unjust or deceitful. It does not rejoice over the misfortunes of others, does not shame and humiliate others, does not place rules and regulations above people's good.

If indeed Jesus "came back" today, how would he judge us?

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