

Don't devalue the priesthood or laity

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

A locally well-known Redemptorist priest recently celebrated his 60th anniversary of ordination at the famed Mission Church in Boston's Roxbury section.

According to the *Boston Globe*, the homilist spoke of the priest's role as "a pretender to the throne of Jesus Christ as King," insisting that Christ's kingship is "personified ... through all the levels of Holy Orders."

Reflecting on the jubilarian's 60 years in the priesthood, the homilist spoke directly to the congregation, some 750 strong: "You have felt the steel hands of Christ the King hidden in the velvet gloves of his (the priest's) love and service."

Younger Catholics would have reason to be mystified by such rhetoric. They have been brought up in the post-conciliar church where the priest is viewed not as someone who rules over the laity or as a king over his subjects, but as a fellow member of God people, who facilitates, and collaborates with, the ministries and charisms of all the baptized.

Younger Catholics would also find exceedingly strange the homilist's reference to the "steel hands of Christ the King." They have come to know the Lord not as a steel-handed king, but as a loving servant who heals the



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

sick, gives hope to the poor, comforts the afflicted, and forgives the sinner.

At the same time, many older Catholics — and especially middle-aged and senior priests — will readily recognize the homilist's style as standard fare at many preconiliar First Masses, anniversary celebrations, and episcopal ordinations (known as "consecrations" in those days).

The priest was regularly described as *alter Christus* ("another Christ"), as if all Christians were not also "other Christs" by reason of their baptism.

The Second Vatican Council brought about a change in that perception. Without diminishing the

ordained priesthood's importance, it emphatically restored the dignity of all the baptized, women and men alike.

According to the council, even if there is a hierarchy of ministerial authority and responsibility in the church, there is no hierarchy of Christian dignity. Indeed, everything the council said about God's people was meant to apply "equally to the laity, religious, and clergy" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n.30).

The redefined relationship between priests and laity in the church has been muddled by the recent proliferation of media reports concerning sexual abuse in the priesthood.

Many Catholics whose understanding of the priesthood was formed and solidified in the years before Vatican II have been so shocked and angered by the media's handling of the issue that they have taken to reasserting the old claims of clerical superiority over the laity.

For them, the priest is a higher type of Christian, closer to God than are lay people, perhaps even "a pretender to the throne of Jesus Christ as King."

Such Catholics charge that the media are trying to drag priests down to the level of ordinary human mortals.

It would be unfortunate in the extreme if — in light of these tragic disclosures — the general public were

to conclude that priests as a group are no longer to be trusted or respected. Most priests, like most service-oriented professionals, are good people, highly motivated in their desire to help others, and reasonably effective in doing so — many exceptionally so.

Contrary to its detractors' prejudices, the priesthood remains a noble vocation. To be a priest is to be a servant of God's servants. It is to be a Christian with a distinctive responsibility to preach the Gospel, to preside at the Eucharist, and to render pastoral care and guidance.

But to exaggerate the priesthood's status and importance is to distort it. And to exaggerate it at the expense of the laity's vocation is to depreciate the sacraments of baptism and confirmation.

One may be impatient, even angry, with the media's treatment of priests in trouble, but it would be theologically erroneous to accuse the media of trying to drag priests down to the laity's level.

The laity were never below the priests in the first place. By baptism priests and lay people alike are "in Christ" and have become thereby "a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), "heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7).

In our efforts to defend the priesthood, we have to be careful not to devalue the laity.

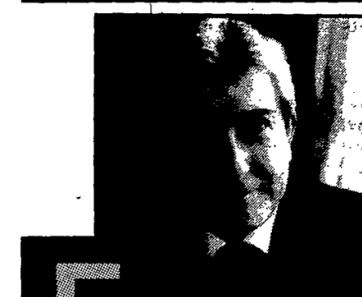
'Bernie's Wall' a symbol of incompetence

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Chicago has a new Monument to Unspiritual Work called, without affection, "Bernie's Wall" — named after Chicago alderman Bernard Stone, who had it erected.

Bernie's Wall is a 10-block-long, \$150,000 concrete-and-steel barrier that runs right down the middle of Howard Street, a fairly narrow city thoroughfare located on the border between Chicago and its northern neighbor, the city of Evanston.

The purpose of Bernie's Wall is to prevent any cars from turning onto any of the side streets in Stone's ward. The reason for Bernie's Wall is that politicians and city officials in both Chicago and Evanston failed to do their work competently.



FAITH AND WORK

The situation is this: Evanston wants to develop a shopping center

on the Howard Street's north side. Nothing wrong with that.

Stone wants to protect his constituents from a new and unacceptable influx of new traffic. Nothing wrong with that.

The two sides cajole, argue, threaten each other. Nothing really wrong with that, either. We all expect our public officials to protect our interests.

At one point, Stone threatens Evanston's public officials to either do it his way or he'll have Chicago build a permanent barrier right down the middle of the street. Still nothing wrong. Sometimes if you are negotiating, you have to get the opposition's attention.

So Stone gets the city of Chicago to approve the \$150,000 to build the bunker. Now Evanston does begin to take him seriously. Now it's time for the real negotiations to begin!

Then, suddenly and without notifying Evanston, Bernie's Wall goes up overnight. Evanston officials, caught flat-footed, are now running around trying to fashion a compromise acceptable to Stone and other Chicago officials, who now take the position that if the wall is to come down, Evanston must pay for both its construction and its destruction.

The wall will come down eventually, of course. It's too ugly and too dangerous to leave it up. Some compromise will be fashioned. Meanwhile, however, Chicago's and Evanston's taxpayers — and maybe elsewhere if state and/or federal funds were used — will see another \$150,000 or more of their money wasted.

All because of Stone's and other politicians' failure to do a good job of dealing with each other.

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