

Reform occurred before Vatican II

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

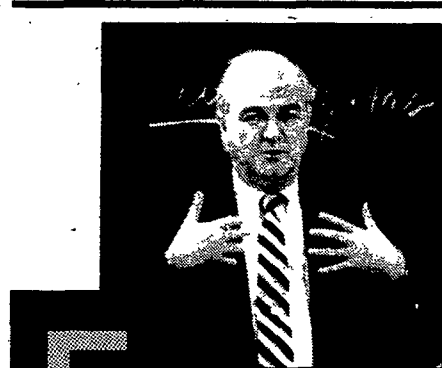
Some Catholics seem to believe the Second Vatican Council was entirely responsible for the changes that have occurred in the Catholic Church since 1965. Ironically, this belief is shared by Catholics at opposite ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum.

Both sides assume, for example, that, before Vatican II, Catholic biblical scholarship was always safely traditional, viewing its principal task as one of providing proof-texts in support of the church's official teachings; that the church was regarded by all as a hierarchical institution, with the laity serving only in passive and subordinate roles; and that the church's liturgy was seen as the clergy's primary, if not exclusive, responsibility.

If it weren't for the council, therefore, Catholic biblical scholars would have not taken up the methods of historical criticism, leading them to question traditional explanations of the church's origin and the institution of the sacraments, especially that of the episcopate and ordained priesthood.

If it weren't for the council, we wouldn't have had all this emphasis on collaborative ministry and instead would have continued to emphasize that the laity "belong" to the church rather than "are" the church.

And if it weren't for the council, the priest would still be celebrating Mass in Latin, with his back to the people, and the laity would not have been "disturbing" one another with



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singing, readings, responses, and handshakes.

Such thinking betrays a lack of knowledge of Catholicism and of Catholic teaching before Vatican II. Specifically, it neglects the extraordinary achievements of Pope Pius XII (d. 1958) who, in so many respects, prepared the way for the council.

This year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of two of Pius XII's major encyclicals: "Mystici Corporis" ("The Mystical Body of Christ") and "Divino Afflante Spiritu" ("On the Promotion of Biblical Studies").

In "Mystici Corporis" the pope described the church as a community in which "all work in mutual collaboration for their common good and for the more perfect building up of the whole Body." This church, he wrote,

has "a variety of members reciprocally dependent."

"One must not think," the pope continued, "that this ordered or 'organic' structure of the Body of Christ contains only hierarchical elements and with them is complete."

"Christ enlightens his whole Church" and "the Spirit of Christ is the channel through which flow into all the members of the Church those gifts, powers and extraordinary graces found superabundantly in (Christ) as in their source ..."

"And so we desire that all who claim the Church as their mother, should seriously consider that not only the sacred ministers and those who have consecrated themselves to God in religious life, but the other members as well of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ have the obligation of working hard and constantly for the upbuilding and increase of this Body."

Later that same year Pope Pius XII issued what has been called the Magna Carta of modern Catholic biblical scholarship: the encyclical "Divino Afflante Spiritu."

He urged Catholic interpreters of the Bible to master and to employ all the tools of modern historical-critical scholarship in order to better understand the original texts' literal meaning in their original historical contexts.

"Let the interpreter then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources

written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed."

Four years later, in 1947, Pius XII issued yet another major encyclical, "Mediator Dei," on the liturgy. He defined it as "the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members."

Without denying the presiding priest's unique role, the pope insisted that — because of their baptisms — the laity fully participate in the church's central act of worship, the Eucharist, and thereby "participate, according to their condition, in the priesthood of Christ."

The pope, therefore, encouraged the practice of the dialogue Mass in which the whole congregation — in word and song — gives the responses traditionally assigned to it from the earliest centuries.

The encyclical "Divino Afflante Spiritu" would find its eventual fulfillment in the council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; "Mystici Corporis," in the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ("Lumen Gentium"); and "Mediator Dei," in the council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

To be sure, the Second Vatican Council has played an utterly crucial role in the Catholic Church's ongoing renewal and reform in our time.

But many of the most important changes that have occurred in the church since the council were anticipated in Pope Pius XII's teachings and in the pre-conciliar church's practice.

Wise man spends time to purchase eternity

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 25:1-3; (R1) Wisdom 8:12-16; (R2) 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

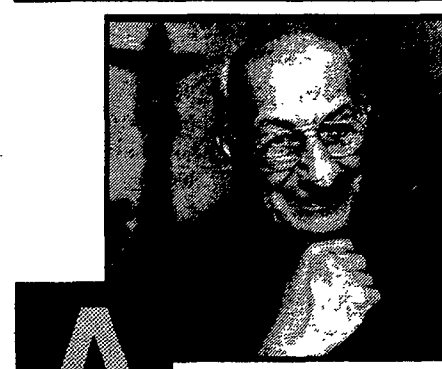
These last three Sundays of the Church Year look toward the coming of Christ in judgment on the last day. This Sunday's theme is: His coming will be unexpected — therefore always be ready.

The Gospel images a wedding feast. Christ is the bridegroom, who comes at the end of the world. Heaven is the wedding feast. We are the virgins: some wise, some foolish.

A foolish person puts off getting ready to the last moment. But there are certain things you cannot put off until the last minute. Everyone knows what will happen to a student who puts off studying until the night before his examinations. It's too late.

It's too late to wait until death to change one's life, to go to confession, to get ready for the judgment.

I was watching a pro-football game a few Monday nights ago. A player got hurt and a reserve rushed on the field to take his place. I thought about that backup player. He didn't wait



WORD FOR SUNDAY

until he was called into the game to get ready. No, like every other backup on a football team, he had trained, prepared himself, long before the game, so that he would be ready should the chance present itself to take another's place. He still practiced even though many a game would come and go before he got his chance.

Even in a play there are understudies: men and women prepared to go on stage at a moment's notice to take

another actor's or actress's place should that become necessary. Although the chance may not come for years, they constantly ready themselves for their part.

If such people prepare for years, how much more should we prepare for the greatest moment of our lives, when the bridegroom comes to call us to eternity?

The U.S. Coast Guard's motto is *Semper Paratus* (Always Ready). We might add that, when it comes to eternity, our motto should be the imperative: Always be ready. The Lord comes when we least expect. The best preparation is prayer and monthly confession. If we are faithful to these two resolves, then we shall at the time of death be able to say, like Cardinal Wiseman, "I feel like a schoolboy going home for the holidays."

The wisdom spoken about in the first reading is being prepared. You can't unfry an egg. As you live, so shall you die; and, as you die, so shall you live for all eternity.

When the foolish virgins in the parable asked the wise ones to give them oil, they answered, "no." They were not being mean. They said, "no," because there are certain things in life

nobody can give us. No one can give another his or her talent. No one can give to another his or her health.

When the character in the morality play "Everyman" is summoned by death to God's judgment seat, he asked his friends to go with him. They answered, "This is a journey you make alone." He went to his coffers to fill his pockets with money, then he remembered that you cannot bribe this Judge.

In despair, he uttered a prayer. Then actual grace appeared on the stage and told him to go to confession. He did. Then three feeble characters appeared, his good works; and they took him by the arm and said, "Come, Everyman, we shall go with you before the judgment seat of God."

The only thing we can bring to the Judgment is our good works. Now is the time to perform them. The most terrible words in the world are: "Too late!"

Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are those, "It might have been."

The fool, like the grasshopper in Aesop's fable, wastes precious time. The wise man spends it to purchase eternity.

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