

Church has its own generation gap

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

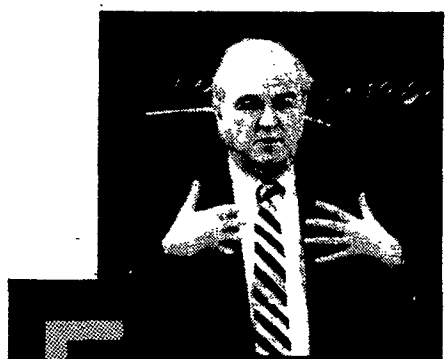
My graduate assistant and I drove together to Chicago recently for a national convention that I would be addressing that evening. We discussed, among other things, his future as a young theologian in the Catholic Church and how his task might differ from those of my generation.

He showed a keen insight into my generation's efforts to help middle-aged and older Catholics maintain a link between the Catholic tradition as they understood and lived it before the Second Vatican Council and their understanding and experience of it today.

For such Catholics, Vatican II was an essentially positive development.

They were heartened by the council's emphasis on the church as the whole People of God. It's not that they advocate a church without a hierarchy, but like the council, they want the hierarchy to be seen as part of the church, in its service, rather than as "the church" itself.

They were gratified by the council's emphasis on the laity's role in the church's work. It's not that they favor a church without priests and religiously professed, but, like the council, they want the lay apostolate looked upon as essential in its own right, and not simply as a participation in — or an appendage of — the hierarchy's and the clergy's.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Such Catholics also welcomed the council's emphasis on the church's servanthood. It's not that they want the church to immerse itself in politics, but, like the council, they support the church's actions in the temporal order on the side of the poor and the powerless in the cause of justice, human rights, and peace.

They were pleased by the council's emphasis on the positive value of other churches and of non-Christian religions. It's not that they deny the church's unique identity as the sacrament of universal salvation, but, like the council, they want to leave behind the triumphalism ("We have the truth; therefore, we have nothing to learn from others") that too often character-

ized Catholicism before the council.

And they welcomed the council's expressions of honesty and realism about the church. It's not that they deny its supernatural character as the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, but, like the council, they think it pastorally important to acknowledge that the church itself, not just its individual members, must always pursue the path of repentance, reform, and renewal.

Such Catholics as these remain committed not only to Jesus Christ and his Gospel, but to the church as well. That is why, in spite of their occasional frustrations, relatively few of them intend to leave the church or be driven from it by others.

A few years hence, however, my graduate assistant and others of his generation will be addressing a much different kind of constituency from the one I have just described.

This younger constituency will not be asking how we can maintain continuity between the old and the new. They have experienced nothing of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Their concern is for the present and future church, not the past.

And their experience even of the present church is also different from that of the older generations. They aren't preoccupied with finding better ways of appointing bishops, for example. They are asking far more fundamental questions: Is religious faith of any kind viable, and is membership in

any church necessary?

And so this new generation will require a different kind of theological approach if the Catholic faith is to illuminate life's most basic human concerns and experiences — in today's and tomorrow's terms, not yesterday's.

Unfortunately, the effort to prepare for the 21st century and the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium gets occasionally sidetracked by a minority of Catholics who continue to hark back to the 1950s as if it were a kind of golden age of Catholicism, when bishops, priests, and women religious filled traditional roles in traditional garb (even on ferris wheels at amusement parts) and were richly honored for it, and when lay Catholics had a sense of fierce, almost tribal, loyalty to their Church and its leaders.

These Catholics seem to forget, however, that a person would have to be at least 50 today to have any meaningful memory at all of the 1950s, and 55 or older to have experienced the 1950s as a teenager or as an adult.

In the meantime, there is a new world and a new church being born. Some of us middle-aged and older folks have to recognize that another generation, not ours, is going to shape them both.

Telling the new generation how great the 1950s were — or what is worse, trying to recreate the 1950s in the 1990s — is hardly the best way to help them meet this challenge.

God enters our lives in unexpected ways

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

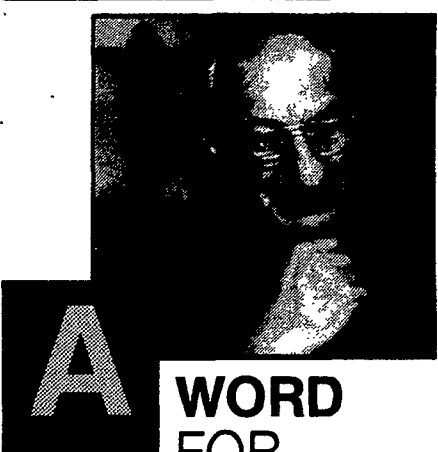
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 1:1-8; (R1) Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; (R2) 2 Peter 3:8-14.

On the Second Sunday of Advent, we are greeted by an unlikely figure — John the Baptist. His hair is wild and unkempt. His clothes smell of wild animals. His diet consists of honey-covered bugs. And his message reflects a fire burning in his soul: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths."

Yet whenever we go we see signs of the Christmas season: festive decorations, brightly colored lights, carols playing loudly at the mall, Christmas specials on television reminding us of the holiday's jolly nature. John the Baptist doesn't seem to fit in with all this.

Advent is about God breaking into our lives at unexpected times. When John the Baptist arrived on the scene, it took everybody by surprise. For more than 300 years, no prophet had appeared in Israel. No word from God. Silence for centuries. Then came John, "A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"

Naturally, there was great excitement. People of the whole Judean



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

countryside went out to the desert to see him. John was an overnight sensation. He was a hit. They felt something wonderful was about to happen, and they wanted to be part of it. And they were right: God was going to break into their lives.

John called for a preparation for this divine "breaking in." He proclaimed "a baptism or repentance for the forgiveness of sins." His message was simple: "repent."

Repent means to turn your life around; turning away from those

things that take us away from God. It is a U-turn in our lives. We have been going in one direction, away from God; we turn completely around and go in the opposite direction, toward God. We can begin this turn-around by making a good confession before Christmas.

The people who streamed out into the desert to hear John wondered if John, himself, might be the long-awaited Messiah. Adamantly, John said no. He proclaimed: "I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals." There in the river John told the people that he baptized them with water, but one day soon, one would come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Forty years ago, Rex Maury was a young Marine lieutenant stationed in Korea. His wife and baby daughter, whom he had never seen, were home in the United States.

On Christmas morning the thermometer hovered around zero with several inches of snow covering the ground. Outdoor Mass was planned for that morning. Though the weather was so inclement, Rex went out of respect and "to set a good example for the even younger Marines." Nearly two hundred marines turned out. They sat on their helmets in the snow.

They faced a small portable altar. The chaplain had no microphone, and the portable organ suffered from the extreme cold.

Yet something happened to Rex at that Mass. God broke through into his life. He thought of all that was precious to him: home, his wife, his unseen infant child. In that moment as they tried to sing Christmas carols in the cold air, he realized that Christmas does not depend on place, fine clothing, expensive meals or gifts.

Rex realized that Christmas is best celebrated as a voluntary act in which we replenish our faith through the bread of the word and our love through the Bread of Life in company with others. Far from home, Rex realized that Christmas is not important, but Him whose birth it celebrates.

Let us not forget in the coming weeks that Jesus is the reason why we celebrate Christmas. Advent reminds us that God often breaks into our lives in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. At those times we discover that we must change our ways and realign ourselves with Jesus Christ.

Amid all the hustle and bustle before Christmas, we need to hear clearly the voice of John the Baptist calling out to each of us, "Prepare the way of the Lord."



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