

Allegations taking toll on church

Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Chicago's archbishop, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, has been a leader in addressing allegations of sexual abuse in the priesthood. He was the first bishop to appoint an independent review board to deal with such cases. Now he himself is subject to this somber process.

The cardinal was named recently in a lawsuit brought against him by a 34-year-old former seminarian who alleges that the cardinal abused him 17 years ago in Ohio. Cardinal Bernardin was archbishop of Cincinnati at the time.

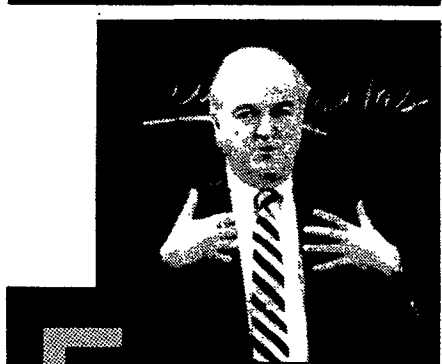
The cardinal has unequivocally denied the charge. He says "categorically that these allegations are completely and utterly false. I have never abused anyone anywhere in all my life."

Those who have known and admired Cardinal Bernardin over many years are saddened and distressed by the charge, but they accept his denial without hesitation.

Nevertheless, the damage is done. As in all cases involving public figures, even an unproven charge leaves a cloud of suspicion hovering over its mark.

Just as some people are asked to imagine the worst in this case — especially those who have never been sympathetic with Cardinal Bernardin's temperate and tolerant pastoral style — others are quick to revile the accuser, as if all accusations against priests were, in principle, false and loathsome.

We should be sadly aware by now



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

that far too many allegations have been well-founded. The out-of-court settlements, now totaling in the millions of dollars, offer grim verification.

Too often church leaders stonewalled or placed their better pastoral instincts in lawyers' hands. As a consequence, the victims themselves were sometimes intimidated, psychologically and financially worn down, and even threatened with countersuits.

We should take care, therefore, as we express our confidence in Cardinal Bernardin and offer him a full measure of our support, that we not respond to his accuser in a manner unworthy of the Gospel.

And neither should we react with a knee-jerk attack on the media. As much

as we'd love to have television and the press report all the good things the church does — in serving the poor, the sick, the homeless, the bereaved, the young, the elderly, and on and on — we know that's not the stuff of everyday news.

And it's not that the media treats the Catholic Church any differently from, let us say, the government. The media regularly reports allegations of misconduct by politicians and relentlessly tracks down evidence of guilt.

Does that do an injustice to the great majority of public servants who are doing the best they can, frequently under difficult circumstances? In a way it does. But it's up to the rest of us to honor such people and not to lump them all together with the malfeasants.

On the other hand, when the media does cross the line of fairness, we have every right and reason to protest.

That seems to have happened in the initial airing of the charges against Cardinal Bernardin on CNN — all day long.

The Cable News Network's original news reports featured excerpts from a documentary it had been preparing for some time on sexual abuse in the priesthood, titled "Fall From Grace." The program was scheduled to air two nights later.

While the documentary itself was better than others that have been telecast in recent months, there wasn't anything really new in it — except for the interview with the cardinal's accuser.

But CNN seems to have done no in-

vestigative reporting of his character and background — at least none that it shared with the viewing audience. We learned very little about him beyond what he himself disclosed.

Some people — including strong critics of the church's handling of the sexual abuse cases — have been asking if the amount of attention CNN accorded the allegation against Cardinal Bernardin was driven more by a desire to promote its long-planned documentary than by the story's intrinsic newsworthiness.

By contrast, *The New York Times* reported the allegation in a small corner of its Saturday-morning edition — on page 12.

The Times is hardly in the back pocket of the Catholic hierarchy. Just ask Cardinal O'Connor.

As we readily extend our support and prayers on behalf of Cardinal Bernardin in this exceedingly painful episode, we do not forget the many victims of abuse and injustice in the church, many of whom have suffered even greater pain than him.

They received no standing ovation from the entire body of U.S. Catholic bishops. No one rallied immediately to their support. On the contrary, they were too often vilified and threatened.

But this is not the time to choose sides, to weight pain against pain. We need to be guided now, more than ever, by the old Latin exhortation, *Oremus pro invicem*, (let us pray for one another).

Let us pray, indeed, for the church.

Offer gifts to others during journey of life

Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

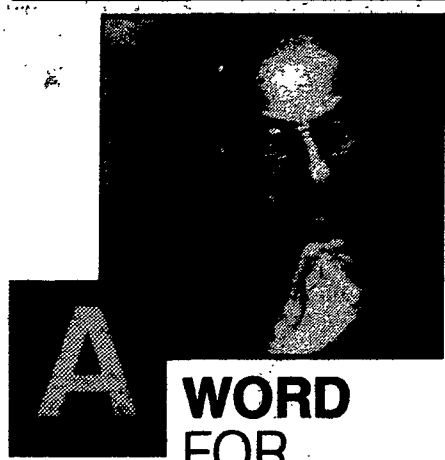
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:26-38; (R1) 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16; (R2) Romans 16:25-27.

Thucydides wrote that "repetition is the heart of understanding." So the church celebrates the same seasons and feasts, year in and year out. And we repeat the same old Christmas stories each year, such as *The Other Wise Man*. Eventually, we might learn the lesson of Christmas.

The Other Wise Man is an inspiring tale, a small classic. It was first told at a Christmas Day service in a New York City church in 1892. Millions have taken heart from its message that there are "some kinds of failure better than success."

Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), a noted American preacher and teacher of English literature, is the work's author. The idea for the story came to him one night, "as a gift, out of the air," after a year of sickness and sorrow, of living with the thought of death at a time when one's work is unfinished, one's goals hardly reached.

The other, or the fourth, wise man was a Medean, Artaban. He set out to follow a star leading to a king. As gifts



WORD FOR SUNDAY

for the king, he carried a sapphire blue as the night sky, a ruby red as the setting sun, and a priceless pearl white as snow. He was to meet his three friends, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, at Babylon. The three promised to wait 10 days for Artaban, who was coming from far off Persia. If he were late, they would leave him, for the time was short.

Artaban rode fast to his rendezvous. On the 10th day when he was only a few hours away from the meeting place, a poor man stricken with marsh

fever begged Artaban for help. To stay and help the man, Artaban would be late. But he did stay; he helped and healed the man.

In so doing, Artaban missed his friends. To cross the fierce Arabian desert, he sold his sapphire to obtain camels and bearers. He was glad that he had helped a man, but sad because the King would never get his sapphire.

He journeyed on in haste and arrived at Bethlehem — but again he was too late. Joseph, Mary and the Child had gone to Egypt. But soldiers were there in Bethlehem with orders from Herod to kill all children two years and under. Artaban was lodging in a home where there was one such child. When the soldiers came to the door, Artaban bribed the captain with his ruby not to enter. The child was saved, the mother overjoyed. But Artaban was sad, for he thought now the King would never have his ruby.

For more than 30 years Artaban wandered looking for the King. One Friday he came to Jerusalem. There was a crucifixion that day. What Artaban heard about this Jesus to be crucified made him think He might be the king. So he headed to Calvary to buy the King's life with his pearl.

On the way, a girl fleeing from sol-

diers, ran into Artaban and cried hysterically, "My father is in debt and they are trying to sell me as a slave to pay the debt. Save me!" Artaban hesitated, then sadly took out his pearl and bought the girl's freedom.

Suddenly, the skies darkened, the earth quaked, and a flying tile hit Artaban. He sank half-conscious to the ground. The girl pillowed his head on her lap. Slowly, Artaban's lips began to move, "Not so, my Lord. When saw I thee hungry and fed thee? or thirsty and gave thee drink? Thirty and three years I sought thee, but never have seen thy face."

Then like a whisper from afar, there came a low sweet voice: "What thou didst unto others, thou didst unto me." Artaban smiled in death, because he knew the King had received his gifts. His journey was ended.

So shall our journey end if during our travels we offer gifts to others for God's sake.

Who seeks for heaven alone to save his soul

May keep the path, but will not reach the goal;

While he who walks in love may wander far,

Yet God will bring him where the blessed are.

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