

Not all teachings have same force

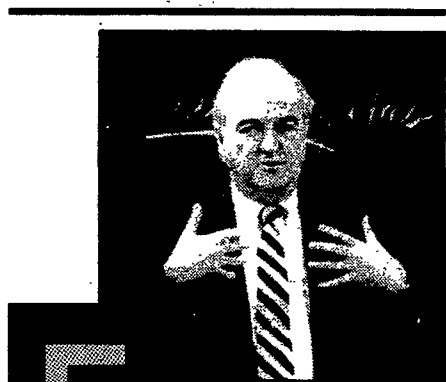
By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

This coming November the church will mark the 30th anniversary of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism. The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25) is an appropriate occasion for reviewing that historic document.

The decree acknowledges that the breakdown of unity in the church was the outcome of "developments for which at times, people on both sides were to blame" (n.3). But no matter who was to blame, "one cannot impute the sin of separation to those who at present are born into these (non-Catholic) communities and are instilled therein with Christ's faith."

That is why Catholics no longer refer to non-Catholic Christians as heretics and schismatics. On the contrary, "The Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers and sisters. For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church."

Despite our differences in matters of doctrine, discipline, and church structure, we recognize that "all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honored by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers and sisters in the Lord by the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church."



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Moreover, "very many" of the most significant and essential elements of the Body of Christ are to be found in non-Catholic churches: the written word of God; the life of grace; the virtues of faith, hope and charity; other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit; and various other visible elements.

Accordingly, these separated churches and communities "have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation." Indeed, the Holy Spirit has used them as "means of salvation."

The Decree on Ecumenism makes these points without prejudice to the traditional teaching that "it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of

salvation can be obtained."

Which is not to say, however, that the Catholic Church is always faithful to its high calling. Although endowed with divinely revealed truth and the means of grace, Catholics "fail to live by them with all the fervor they should" (n.4).

Nor does the teaching imply that there is only one, uniform way even of being Catholic. "While preserving unity in essentials, let all members of the Church ... preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity be exercised."

Within a certain segment of the Catholic Church today, this principle is either strongly resisted or ignored, especially the last sentence about charity. But if we Catholics cannot grant our Catholic sisters and brothers the necessary latitude to express their Catholic faith in ways different from our own — spiritually, canonically, liturgically, and theologically — how can we expect to be open and tolerant toward our non-Catholic brothers and sisters, as the council enjoins us to be?

And if we Catholics oppose efforts within our own church that are designed to promote renewal and reform, how can we hope to fulfill the council's mandate to work for Christian unity by following the path of "that continual reformation of which (the Church) always has need" — even when that need touches upon "the for-

mulation of doctrine" (n.6)?

Indeed, "various theological formulations are often to be considered as complementary rather than conflicting" (n.17).

In this regard, one of the most important principles in the Decree on Ecumenism concerns what is known as the "hierarchy of truths."

"When comparing doctrines," the Decree insists, "(Catholic theologians) should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith" (n.11).

The same segment of the Catholic Church referred to above has similar difficulty with this principle. Such Catholics mistakenly believe that all of the church's official teachings are of equal weight and importance.

The hierarchy-of-truths principle challenges that assumption. Not all teachings have the same authoritative force. Belief in angels, for example, is not so central to Catholic faith as is belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Just because such teachings come from the same source, namely, the official magisterium, does not mean that they have the same doctrinal force.

That principle applies not only to teachings that pertain to faith, but to teachings that pertain to morals as well.

In fact, it was at the center of the controversy surrounding Father Charles E. Curran's status as a Catholic theologian several years ago.

Pray that God makes us more Christlike

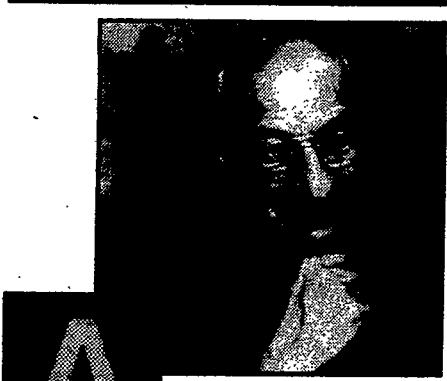
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 1:14-20; (R1) Jonah 3:1-5, 10; (R2) 1 Corinthians 17:29-31.

The book of Jonah takes up just two pages in the Bible. Why not read it this week? It is really a humorous story, full of satire and irony. Probably the only historical thing about it is the name of the prophet Jonah. But he is not the author of the book. Jonah lived in the 8th century B.C., whereas the story was written around 400 B.C.

The Jews had just come back from exile in Babylon (536 B.C.). During their exile, pagans had settled in Palestine. To the great detriment of their religion, the Jews who returned started to intermarry with the pagans.

In this crisis, God raised up Nehemiah, who went around breaking up these mixed marriages. As a result of this cleansing movement, the Jews got the idea that God was their particular possession and that He had no interest in other people. Theologically, of course, this is unsound. God is the God of all men. He wills the salvation of all peoples, no matter what their nation may be. If they repent, He will be merciful. "God is good and upright, he shows sinners the way"



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

(Response).

The story of Jonah is a parable meant to teach this truth.

The author's parable is delightful but fictitious. God sends Jonah to Niniveh, the capital of cruel Assyria — destroyer of 10 of Israel's 12 tribes. Hence for the Jew, Assyria personified evil and enmity with God. Yet Jonah was told by God to preach penance to this despised and hated people. Jonah does not relish the role. In fact, he takes off in the opposite direction to escape fulfilling it. He

boards a ship headed west.

God, of course, is not to be frustrated. He performs miracle after miracle — a storm, a choice by lot, and a big fish. After a three-day retreat in the fish's belly, Jonah decided to go along with God's request.

Conveniently spewed up in the northern section of the Mediterranean, he goes to Niniveh and preaches. But then the worst possible thing — in the eyes of Jonah — occurs: he is a success. The Ninivites listen and are converted and are saved. Horrors!

Jonah sulks. He had been the object of God's mercy: God forgave his disobedience, saved him from drowning. And yet, Jonah would deny this same mercy to others. What a satire on the narrow-mindedness of those who all along have been the recipients of God's mercy, and yet begrudge that same mercy to others.

In the Gospel Jesus preaches the same message of mercy. The good news He proclaimed was that God is the God of all men — "a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loath to punish" (Jon. 4:2).

Only one condition is set to receive God's favors. It is the same condition set for the Ninivites: "Reform your lives." This means more than just keeping the Commandments. Jesus

meant for us to believe in the good news. To "believe in the good news" means doing what the four apostles called by Jesus did: to follow Him unconditionally and share His task of spreading the good news about God's love and mercy for all men.

The following of Christ is the reformation, the renewal, asked for by the Gospel. This means reorienting one's entire personality so that it radiates Christ.

Without God's help this is impossible. Each day, therefore, we must pray, like Cardinal Newman, that God makes us more and more Christlike. I suggest we cut out his prayer and say it daily:

Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere.
Flood my soul with your spirit and life.

Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of yours.

Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.

Paul says the time is short (R2). So get with it!

"Conscience has rights because it has duties."

Cardinal John Henry Newman

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