

Counsels are often misunderstood

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Relatively few of us are called to a consecrated life with a public profession, recognized and sanctioned by the church, of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

But all of us are called to holiness, and it is a holiness that "shines out in the practice of the counsels customarily called 'evangelical'" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n.40).

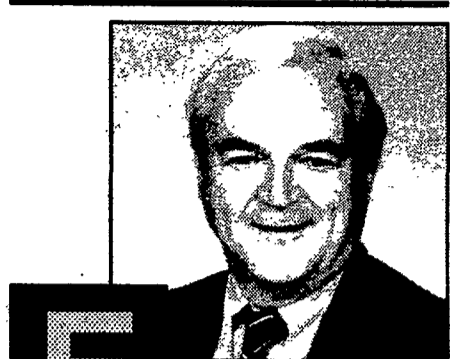
The evangelical counsels, therefore, are not exclusively for those who have taken formal vows in the church. They are for all of us, and Lent is a particularly fitting season to reflect on their place in our Christian lives.

Unfortunately, the evangelical counsels are easily misunderstood. The evangelical counsel of poverty, for example, is too often quantified, as if poverty were simply a matter of owning little or nothing of material value.

But since that state of life seems out of the question for most of us, we soothe our consciences by embracing instead "the spirit" of poverty.

Thus, even if we had the possessions and the lifestyle of a Donald Trump, we could somehow twist and shape our situation so that it would conform — in our own minds at least — to gospel specifications.

We're rich, yes, but we give a lot to



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charity or to the church. Besides, we worked hard for what we have.

The evangelical counsel of poverty is far removed from that approach. Rather, it involves "a protest against the tyranny of having, of possessing and of pure self-assertion. It impels those practicing it into practical solidarity with the poor whose poverty is not a matter of virtue but is their condition of life and the situation exacted of them by society" (Johannes Metz, Followers of Christ, Paulist Press, 1978, p. 49).

This means that to be poor in the evangelical sense of the word is to refuse to accept and to live by the standards of a society or a culture that de-

finer personal worth by money, power, and social status. Thus, the more one has, the more important one is, the more attention, access, and deference one is due.

Take, for example, the case of two people phoning for an immediate appointment to see the bishop. One is a lay woman in charge of a social service agency, the other is a multi-millionaire businessman who has donated large amounts of money to the diocese. The bishop has a busy schedule. Who is more likely to get the appointment?

In such a case, the bishop, regardless of his own financial net worth, has a chance to fulfill the evangelical counsel of poverty — by not allowing money, power, and status to dictate his decision, whatever it turns out to be.

Indeed, Jesus' message is that everyone is of infinite worth, regardless of wealth or status. In treating people as Jesus did, that is, in not measuring others' worth or dignity by what they have, we live by the counsel of poverty.

The evangelical counsel of chastity, too, is often misunderstood. It does not call us only to a life of celibacy (since the married also have to be chaste). Like poverty, it calls for a readiness to let go, to subordinate our appetites — not just for sexual gratification, but for money and power — to the coming reign of God's justice

and peace.

The counsel of chastity, for married and celibate alike, impels us toward solidarity with the unmarried, the separated, the divorced, and the widowed (especially the elderly). For such people loneliness and resignation are not virtues freely embraced, but facts of life, not of their own choosing.

The evangelically chaste proclaim the liberating message that God loves those who are alone and powerless.

The evangelical counsel of obedience, finally, is too often distorted by military and familial imagery. To be obedient is to follow orders — from one's commanding officers or from one's parents. In the church, it may be the orders of the pope, the bishop, or the pastor.

But Jesus' obedience of the Father was never an end in itself. He was obedient out of fidelity to his mission, that is, in order to preach the good news to the poor, the outcasts, the unclean, the socially marginalized. Following Christ in his obedience, therefore, is to reach out to those in need.

The evangelical counsel of obedience "impels one to stand close to those for whom obedience is not a matter of virtue but the sign of oppression and of being placed in tutelage, and to do this in a practical way" (Metz, p. 67).

Those who are truly obedient in this way may be mistaken for fools or rebels, or both. But so was Jesus.

Ten Commandments are God's guides

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

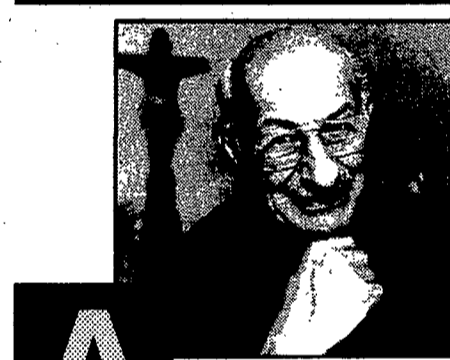
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 2:13-25; (R1) Exodus 20:1-17; (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

ABC News anchor Ted Koppel gave a very popular commencement address at Duke University a few years ago. After listing various examples of national malaise, Koppel asked rhetorically, "Now what is the answer to what ails us?"

Then he proceeded to go through all of the Ten Commandments, telling the graduates that "these are called the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions."

The Holy Father, in his latest encyclical, points out that modern man has such a hang-up on freedom that he has looked upon all laws as unduly constrictive and harmful to human potential. We Americans don't like to be told what to do. For us, by definition, laws are an unfair restriction of our individual prerogative, a hedge on our God-given right to do as we please.

It is significant that the government uses the Latin word *lex, legis*, for law. The word means "to bind." The government sees law as binding one's will. The church, however, uses the Latin word *ius* for law; she calls her Canon



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Law, *Canonicus Jus*. *Jus* means "right." The church sees law as safeguarding the rights of man, not destroying them. Laws are not like dams impeding freedom; they are like levees, preventing the waters of selfishness and concupiscent from flooding the countryside.

We are free to ignore the law of gravitation and jump off the Empire State Building, but each time we ignore the law, we either diminish or destroy our liberty. Real freedom is attained not by acting outside the law, but by acting within the law. There is

no such thing as freedom from law; there is only freedom within the law.

G.K. Chesterton once said, "If a person comes to the edge of a cliff and keeps on walking, he will not break the law of gravity, he will prove it." It's not that we are breaking the rules. Our sad lives are testimonial to the continuing validity of the rules.

So, we mustn't think of God giving the Decalogue, like in the movie, *The Ten Commandments*, blustering and thundering from on high. Rather, God is like a loving mother, who warns her child not to play with fire. He knows what will best guide us to happiness and freedom. In fact, the Hebrews call the Ten Commandments the "Torah," which means the way. The Ten Commandments show us the way to walk. They are reliable guides from God, pointing us in the right direction.

Maybe now that we have seen where our free-thinking has led us, we might be ready to go back and look again at the Decalogue.

So the issue is not, will I follow the rules or not? But rather, will the rules I follow be destructive or life-giving. The Commandments are meant to be practical, basic, everyday trustworthy guides for us. They are meant to free, not to enslave.

Katherine Lee Bates, in her song "America, the Beautiful" writes:

*America! America! God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.*

Robert Frost put it this way: "I guess one way of putting it would be that you have freedom when you're easy in your harness." He also wrote: "Good fences make good neighbors." We couldn't have a football or basketball game without lines and limits. Man is free, but his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The forbidden fruit is to make ourselves the judges of right and wrong. When we do, freedom dies.

When you buy a new car, you get an owner's manual. The instructions do not restrict your freedom. If the book says, use unleaded gas, you are free to use leaded gas. But if you do, you will damage the motor. The instructions help you keep your car in good running order. So with God's commandments. They tell what is best for us. We are free to ignore them. But to remain free, we must be bound by them.

I suggest a poster of the Ten Commandments be placed in every Catholic school room and in the kitchen of every home.

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