

COLUMNS
COMMENTARY

Church's problems could be worse

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Former president Ronald Reagan is said to have won the debate and the presidential election in 1980 with the question, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?"

As we approach the end of the Second Christian millennium, Catholics could ask a variation of the same question, "Is the Church better off now than it was a thousand years ago?"

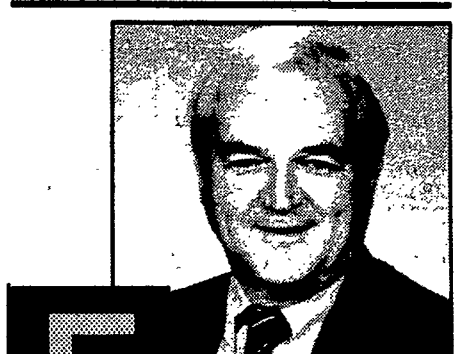
The Holy Roman Empire, created and dominated by Charlemagne, was in ruins, and so, too, was much of European social structure.

The papacy, no longer protected by a strong and sympathetic temporal power, also slid into decay. It became a kind of political football in the hands of local Roman factions. In the process, it lost most of its moral and spiritual authority.

The nadir was reached in the pontificate of John XII, the illegitimate 18-year-old son of the prince of Rome.

After some dubious military adventures, a few disastrous political maneuvers, and an instance of savage reprisals against his enemies, John XII was forced to flee the city of Rome, and while still in his 20s, died of a stroke in what one might call a compromising situation.

In 964, following John XII's death, there was no smooth transition as there



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was, a thousand years later, in 1963, when Paul VI succeeded another Pope John to the papacy.

In 964 it wasn't clear who really belonged in the Chair of Peter. John XII had actually been deposed at one point by a Roman synod, and replaced by a layman who, after being rushed through minor and major orders in a single day, took the name Leo VIII.

Leo himself was later deposed and excommunicated by John, and all ordinations done by Leo were declared invalid. On John's death, the Romans ignored Leo and asked Otto, the emperor of the revived but smaller Holy Roman Empire, to allow them to elect

the cardinal-deacon Benedict.

Otto refused, but the Romans went ahead and elected and enthroned Benedict anyway. At which point Otto's army besieged the hunger-ridden city and reinstated Leo. A few days later another Roman synod deposed and degraded Benedict.

And "degraded" he was. Benedict was stripped of his pontifical robes and insignia, and had his pastoral staff broken over his head by Leo himself.

The following year (965) a former librarian, John XIII, was elected, but within two months he, too, was the object of a revolt in Rome, during which he was assaulted, imprisoned, and then banished.

After he escaped, the Romans repented of their action and John returned to the city. After his death he was succeeded by Benedict VI.

While the emperor was occupied with troubles in Germany, however, a nationalist revolt in Rome toppled Benedict in June of 974. He was imprisoned at Castel Sant'Angelo, just a short distance from St. Peter's, and a deacon was hastily elected to succeed him, taking the name Boniface VII.

Boniface had Benedict strangled to death so that his own title to the papacy would not be contested. It didn't work, however. History lists Boniface VII with the antipopes, not the real ones. Benedict VI's legitimate successor in 974 was a Roman aristocrat

who took the name Benedict VII. He immediately held a synod at which the antipope, Boniface VII, was excommunicated.

But Boniface led a subsequent coup that drove Benedict VII out of Rome. Upon appeal to the emperor, Benedict was able to return. He did his best to initiate some reforms in the church and he actually restored some luster to the papal office. Unfortunately, soon after Benedict's successor, John XIV, was elected, the emperor died, leaving the new pope defenseless.

He was captured, deposed, and imprisoned, also in Castel Sant'Angelo, where he died of starvation — or some say, of poisoning.

Enter now John XV who was the reigning pope exactly one thousand years ago (985-996). Known for his avariciousness and nepotism, and hated by his own clergy, he, too, was forced to flee the city, only to return a year later under imperial order.

But before the emperor could reach Rome to reinstall John XV, the pope died of a violent fever.

The next time anyone is tempted to wring their hands over "the state of their church," they ought to think for a moment about the comparable period just before the end of the First Christian Millennium.

The church may have its problems today, but they could be a lot worse — and they were.

Accept suffering if you can't stop it

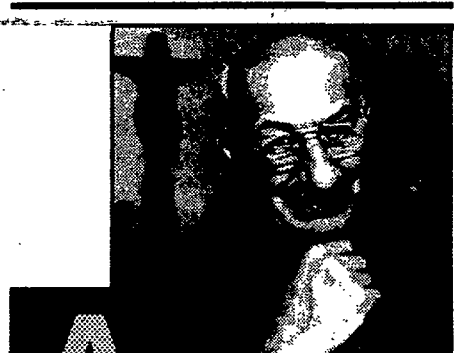
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 12:20-33; (R1) Jeremiah 31:31-34; (R2) Hebrews 5:7-9.

The events in next Sunday's Gospel took place during the last week of our Lord's life. He had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. His entry had been like a triumphal march of a monarch. His raising the rich and renowned Lazarus from the dead a few days before had skyrocketed His popularity.

When He got into Jerusalem, the first place our Lord visited was the Temple. He was angered by what He saw. The Gentiles' court had been turned into a veritable marketplace. In His anger, Jesus cleaned out the Temple.

His action displeased the Jewish authorities, but it highly pleased the Greeks and the Gentiles. They appreciated what Jesus had done for them, so they wanted to see Him, not just to look at Him (they would not have had to go to Philip for that), but to interview Him. They wanted to find out if He were the Messiah. And perhaps to ask Him, if He were the Messiah, to come to the Gentiles, who would give Him a much better recep-



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

tion than the Jews, whom everybody knew were plotting to destroy Him.

They went to Philip, whose name was Greek and whose hometown of Bethsaida bordered the 10 Greek cities of northern Palestine. Philip went to Andrew, whose name also is Greek, and both of them went to Jesus to ask for this interview.

This request by the Gentiles was one

of the great moments in Jesus' life. For this incident marks the first hint that Jesus meant the Gospel to have a worldwide outreach. Ecstatically, He cried out, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

"The hour has come," that is, the moment has come to begin action that will lead to bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles. And His glory was precisely this, to draw all men to Himself, not just the Jews.

And the action that was to begin this worldwide evangelization was to be His death. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit."

Sometimes we think the cross was easy for Jesus. The agony in the garden of Gethsemane narrated by the synoptics and the letter to the Hebrews (R2) tell us differently. In the garden He prayed, "Lord, if it is possible, let this chalice pass ..." "He offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God ..." But it was not possible, so Jesus obediently accepted the cross "and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

In this dramatic way, Jesus taught us one of the hardest lessons in life

for us to learn; namely, that suffering accepted obediently as God's will leads to redemption. Jesus did not come to take away the cross. Rather, He came to give us strength to carry the cross and to use it to lift us up to the highest perfection. *Per crucem ad lucem* — "Through the cross to the light." *Per aspera ad astra* — "Through the bitter paths to the stars."

The cross is purificatory. As gold is purified by fire, the heart is purified by suffering accepted. "Virtue is made perfect in infirmity."

The cross is illuminative. Suffering graciously accepted creates an understanding heart, makes one compassionate and patient. The little flower that bloomed in Bethlehem never gave forth so sweet an odor until it was placed in the vase of the cross.

The cross is unitive. It conforms us to Christ. St. Margaret, when suffering intensely, complained to our Lord, hanging on a cross above her bed. Our Lord took life and said to her, "Margaret, I wasn't laughing when I loved you."

Eliminate suffering if you can; accept it, if you cannot; for the sufferings of this world are nothing compared to the glory to come.

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