

German bishops displayed heart

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

One sometimes hears bishops, priests, and other church ministers praised for having a "pastoral" heart or for being "very pastoral" in the exercise of their offices. What does the word "pastoral" mean here?

Perhaps the best way to answer the question is by providing a concrete example.

A recent pastoral letter issued jointly by three German bishops provides us with a splendid case in point. (The document has been published in the March 10 issue of *Origins*.)

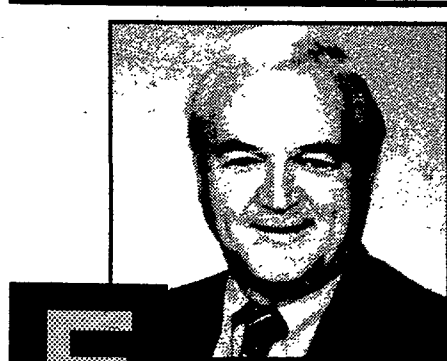
The pastoral letter, issued over the names of Bishop Karl Lehmann of Mainz, president of the German bishops' conference, Archbishop Oskar Saier of Freiburg, conference vice-president, and Bishop Walter Kasper of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, highlights the need for greater pastoral ministry to divorced and divorced-and-remarried Catholics.

The bishops' pastoral heart shows itself in the way they address this sensitive issue.

First, they are realistic. They recognize that very many marriages today break down, and that ecclesiastically solemnized marriages are no exception.

Furthermore, they acknowledge that the causes that have led to this situation are "extremely diverse." No simplified solutions. Nor scapegoats.

Some of those causes have to do with social changes, such as the increased length of a marriage (because



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

of longer life-expectancy) and the dissolution of the traditional extended family. Some causes are personal, such as unreasonable expectations of happiness, immaturity, and mutual misunderstanding.

Second, the bishops are sensitive. They recognize the feelings divorced people have about the church's and society's lack of understanding of their situation as well as their feelings of isolation.

"We must ask ourselves," the bishops write, "how we can be credible witnesses to the closeness of God to the divorced and to the divorced and remarried in their difficult human situation. How can we stand by them and help them, how can we give them new perspectives, courage for life and reconciliation? For many people today the Church's credibility rests on

the answer to this question."

Third, the bishops are balanced. On the one hand, they reaffirm Jesus' and the church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. On the other hand, they insist that the church "cannot shut its eyes to the failure of many marriages." Fourth, the bishops are compassionate. "For wherever people fall short of the reality of redemption," they write, "Jesus meets them in mercy with understanding for their situation."

So, too, the church "must ask itself how it can stand by them in solidarity and be a helpful companion along the way."

One means of doing that, the bishops declare, is by assuring divorced and divorced-and-remarried Catholics that they still belong to the church as active members, and that they should experience the church "as a healing and helping community." Indeed, the divorced who do not remarry can continue to receive the Eucharist.

Fifth, the bishops are not rigid. They point out that those who have remarried outside the church "generally" may not receive the Eucharist. But the word "generally" is crucial here.

The bishops remind us that canon law can "set up only a valid general order; it cannot regulate all of the often very complex individual cases." The latter can only be "clarified through pastoral dialogue whether that which is generally valid applies also in a given situation."

If those involved in a second, civil marriage should satisfy their own consciences of the nullity of their first mar-

riage, even if no legal proofs exist, those decisions of conscience "must be respected by the Church and the congregation. To accompany others on their way to a mature decision of conscience is the service and mission of pastoral care, especially by priests..."

"Neither an exaggerated strictness nor a weak flexibility will help," the bishops argue. "The model for our speech and action must be only Jesus Christ."

Among the practical guidelines accompanying the pastoral letter are several regarding the admission of the divorced-and-remarried to the Eucharist.

Such people may consider approaching the eucharistic table: (1) if they were not mainly at fault for the break-up of the first marriage; if they were, that responsibility must be acknowledged and repented; (2) it must be clear that the first marriage cannot be restored; (3) restitution must have been made for wrongs and injuries in the first marriage; (4) obligations to the first spouse and children must have been met; (5) there must be no scandal; (6) the second marriage must have proved itself over a long period of time; (7) leaving the new family would be the cause of grievous injustice; and (8) the parties must be moved by genuinely religious desires to participate in the church's sacramental life.

Is this the last word on the subject of pastoral care for the divorced? Of course not. But it's a vibrantly "pastoral" word that can provide guidance and hope to many.

God promises mercy whenever we ask

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

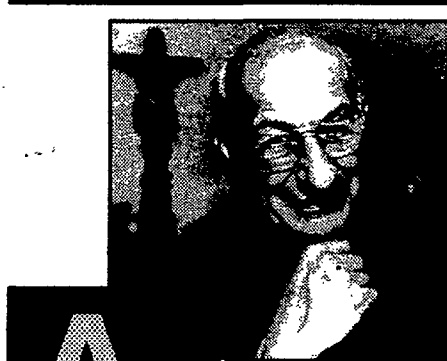
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-31; (R1) Acts 4:32-35; (R2) 1 John 5:1-6.

In the 1930s, a simple uneducated Polish woman religious, Sister Maria Faustina Kowalska, allegedly received a message of mercy from our Lord and was told to spread it throughout the world. She died in 1938 at the age of 33. She was beatified April 18, 1993.

Her message of mercy is that God loves us — each and everyone of us — no matter how great are our sins. God wants us to know that His love for us and His goodness are greater than all evil.

His message of mercy can be remembered by thinking of ABC.

• A — ask for God's mercy. We are free. God will not force his graces on us. Ask, and you will receive. Jesus specified the three o'clock prayer. "At three o'clock implore My mercy, especially for sinners; and, if only for a brief moment, immerse yourself in My Passion ... This is the hour of great mercy ... In this hour I will refuse nothing to the soul that makes a re-



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

quest of Me in virtue of My Passion."

Then He asked that we say the Chaplet of Mercy each day.

Begin with the Our Father, Hail Mary, and the Apostles' Creed.

On the large bead before each decade say:

Eternal Father, I offer You the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your dearly beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and

those of the whole world.

On the 10 small beads of each decade say:

For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and the whole world.

And conclude with:

Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us and on the whole world. (Three times)

• B — be merciful. God wants us to be loving and forgiving toward others, just as He is toward us.

The church teaches we can be merciful by performing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

The corporal works are to feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; comfort the imprisoned; visit the sick; and bury the dead.

The spiritual works are to admonish sinners; instruct the uninformed; counsel the doubtful; comfort the sorrowful; be patient with sinners; forgive offenses; pray for the living and the dead.

• C — complete trust. God wants us to know that the graces of His mercy are dependent upon our trust. God's mercy is like a bottomless well; trust is the bucket. How much we

draw from God's mercy will depend on the size of the bucket, the degree of our trust.

Jesus also requested that the Sunday after Easter be officially established in the church as the feast of Mercy.

And what are the fountains of mercy? The sacraments of penance and Eucharist. Jesus promised that "the soul that will go to Confession (within eight days before or after Mercy Sunday) and receive Holy Communion on that Sunday shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment."

A final request of Jesus was that we venerate the image of Divine Mercy: a portrait of Jesus with one hand extended in blessing and the other on His breast from which red and pale rays emanate representing the blood and water that flowed from His pierced Heart. Beneath the picture is the phrase: Jesus, I Trust in You!

Jesus promised, "The soul that will venerate this image will not perish."

God Has promised us mercy whenever we ask for it, but He has not promised us tomorrow. Tomorrow, judgment; today, mercy.

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