

## Church must learn from lessons

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

For many Catholics the headline and photograph on the front page of *The New York Times* on June 10, 1994, must have generated an immediate reaction of shock, grief, and then outrage.

"Rebels in Rwanda Said to Slay 3 Bishops and 10 Other Clerics." The story is accompanied by a photograph of the Archbishop of Kigali — one of the murdered bishops — in an audience with Pope John Paul II four years ago.

The bishops and priests were killed by soldiers of the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda Patriotic Front. An official of the rebel group insisted that the killers were "misguided" soldiers who had been assigned to guard the clerics. He speculated that the soldiers had thought that the bishops and priests — all members of the majority Hutu tribe — had been involved somehow in the earlier massacres of their own families.

As one reads the report, however, the initially unambiguous emotions of shock, grief, and outrage begin to give way to more ambivalent ones.

Human-rights activists in Rwanda point out that the archbishop, Vincent Nsengiyumva, was deeply involved in the country's politics, having served as a member of the central committee of the late President Habyarimana's party.

(Rwanda's president, like the archbishop, was a member of the majority Hutu tribe. He had been killed in a suspicious plane crash more than two



### SSAYS IN THEOLOGY

months ago. It was that incident which precipitated the tribal bloodletting between Hutus and Tutsis that has set new low standards for human brutality.)

One of the other slain bishops, Joseph Ruzindana, was a relative of the late president. The third bishop, who was also the president of the Rwanda Conference of Catholic Bishops, had the same last name as the archbishop, but it is unclear whether the two were related.

An American expert on Rwanda (a former Belgian colony) said — on the basis of information she had received from Belgian Catholic contacts — that at a meeting in Kabgaye on May 24 Hutu militia leaders had presented the archbishop with a list of 16 priests, a woman religious, and a lay person whom they wished to take away. Ac-

ording to the report, the archbishop gave his consent and the individuals disappeared.

But in the same issue of *The New York Times*, there is also a report that two months before they were killed, the three bishops had joined in an impassioned plea for peace negotiations between government forces (under Hutu control) and the Tutsi rebels.

The letter cited the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," and urged government forces to "protect everybody without distinction of ethnicity, party or region."

The bishops' appeal also seemed to acknowledge the rebels' demands. It expressed the hope that negotiations would "put in place broadly based transitional institutions" leading to a new government.

If there are any lessons to be learned from this terrible new tragedy in Rwanda, they are not easy to determine.

Perhaps one is by way of a reminder of how secure and even comfortable our own lives as Catholics are in countries such as our own. Despite all the brave talk about counter-culturalism, none of us is in any danger of paying the price of persecution, imprisonment, or death for standing firm against the prevailing social and moral winds.

On the contrary, some of our most vocal counter-culturalists are in the securest of jobs, with the most lucrative of connections, and with ample opportunities for the kind of gratification one can readily derive from public attention.

But the recent brutal murders in Rwanda call us all up short. While it is clear that in some regions of the world being a Catholic leader is still a dangerously high-risk occupation, exposing one even to death, that surely is not the case with us.

Our situation may be reminiscent of the period just after a new era of toleration dawned under Constantine the Great at the beginning of the fourth century. Christians were not only liberated from persecution; they were accorded a new status of privilege.

That change so worried the real counter-culturalists of those days, that the monastic movement was born. Christians literally went into the desert or adopted other non-conformist lifestyles in order to maintain their uncompromising commitment to the Gospel. There would be no privileges for them, nor any drinking at the social, political, and financial troughs.

Another possible lesson from this latest Rwandan tragedy has to do with the church's involvement in politics.

Speaking out for justice, even at the risk of death, as in El Salvador, is one thing. Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated at Mass, the four churchwomen who were raped and murdered, and the six Jesuits who were dragged from their beds and brutally shot to death were martyrs for the faith.

But becoming directly involved in the political processes of government, as in Nicaragua and now, it seems, in Rwanda, is another.

Lessons, alas, are easier to identify than to learn from.

## Thorns can be blessings in disguise

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

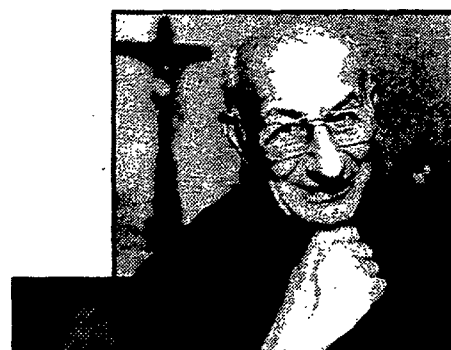
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 6:1-6; (R1) Ezechiel 2:2-5; (R2) 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Most of us feel we could get along very nicely in life without thorns — those diabolical, botanical barbs that prick, scratch, and irritate us whenever we reach for a rose or try to pick a blackberry.

Why did God think up thorns anyway? Of course we know that the prickly armor protects plants from being eaten indiscriminately by goats, camels, and donkeys, and that thorns reduce transpiration and loss of water during dry periods.

Why wouldn't God remove the "thorn in the flesh" in Paul's life? Especially after Paul prayed three times for it to be taken from him? Jesus prayed the night before He died that He be spared the crown of thorns. But God didn't remove them. Why the thorns in Jesus' life? Why the thorns in Paul's life? Why the thorns in your life and mine?

Paul supplies an answer. We don't know what his "thorn in the flesh" was really. There has been a lot of



### WORD FOR SUNDAY

scholarly speculation on the point. Some have thought it was epilepsy, others thought it ophthalmia or malaria or stuttering or some chronic disease.

It could have been some persistent, obnoxious opponent, an agent of Satan, attacking Paul's preaching or way of life or his claims to apostleship. It doesn't really matter what the infirmity or handicap was, what is useful for us today is how Paul coped with

it. He saw it as a means to grace by knocking out his pride and keeping him dependent on God. The thorn was a blessing in disguise.

Paul encapsulates the thorn's theology in a memorable phrase cast into God's mouth: "My grace is enough for you." And then a follow-up promise: "For in weakness power reaches perfection."

That's a strong message for all of us regardless of the particular thorn in our side: illness, handicap, hardship, abuse, calamity, an unfaithful spouse, an incorrigible child, addiction, and so on. Everybody has at least one thorn attacking and bothering them. Like Paul we may have prayed to get rid of it. We wonder why it is. Why do bad things happen to good people?

Shakespeare once said, "Sweet are the uses of adversity." Bacon, "Adversity doth best discover virtue; prosperity doth bet discover vice." The irritations of God. Painful but productive, if the thorn leads to humility and God.

A coal miner's son in Corbin, Ky., was the oldest of many children. Because his father worked in the mines and his mother had to go outside the

home and work in a shirt factory, he was assigned the task of cooking for the whole family. For a young athletically inclined boy who would much rather be out playing ball, the chore was a real thorn in his side. But he made the most of it and got to be quite a good cook — especially frying chicken.

The young man's name was Harland Sanders and the whole world now knows what he did with his Kentucky Fried Chicken recipe.

New Zealand is a fascinating country. Do you know that there are no dangerous wild animals or reptiles there. Not one! A child could wander through its primeval forest unharmed.

Also, do you know that New Zealand is the home of more flightless birds than any other country: the kiwi, the kakapo, the penguin, and the weka rail? These birds had wings but lost them. Food was abundant and there were no fearsome beasts or reptiles. They had no need to fly for food. They never flew; now they cannot fly.

It could be the same with us. The thorns we dread spur us on, compel us to expand the spirit's wings. It is our need driving us to God's mercy and grace.

STOREWIDE SALE

30% off

all gifts and all Hallmark cards,  
albums, giftwrap & candles

Colony

Card & Gift Shoppe

540 Merchants Rd. • 654-9860

Catechism of the  
Catholic Church

English/Spanish Editions

Now available at  
The Marian Center  
378 Ridge Rd. East

467-8570

PATRIOT YOUTH CENTER BINGO

"Favorite of the Bingo Pros"

1408 Buffalo Road-Rochester, NY 14624

Double Bingo every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 7:30 PM and 9:00 PM

and every Saturday at 7:00 PM and 9:00 PM

Penny Bingo Every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday

Bingo Info Hotline: 235-2639



Fully Computerized - Monitors Throughout the Hall  
Total Prize Money Wed. & Fri. \$2250; Thurs. & Sat. \$2000