

Public policy stances lack consistency

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

It's always a matter of prudential judgment whether or not the pastoral leaders of the church should speak out on specific public-policy issues, or take an active role in campaigns to change those policies, or even to challenge the moral legitimacy of a sitting government.

There simply are no hard-and-fast rules of engagement, such as the military would have. The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, for example, offers only a general principle to justify the hierarchy's involvement in the political sphere:

"(The Church) has the right to pass moral judgments, even in matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary" (n. 76).

Since violations of "basic personal rights" are never limited to one kind of political regime, one would expect the leadership of the church to stand about as frequently in opposition to an extreme right-wing government as to an extreme left-wing government. The record doesn't seem always to support that expectation.

During the Cold War, "atheistic" communism was the enemy that galvanized episcopal opposition all over the world. But communism was not only atheistic; it also was contemptuous of the human rights of all citizens: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to a fair and public trial before a jury



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of one's peers, the right to counsel, the right to confront one's accusers, and so on.

Such rights, however, only recently have been formally recognized in the church itself, as in the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law (canons 208-223). Before the middle of this century, censorship and the imposition of penalties without due process, for example, were not only common in the church but also were defended as if derived from the apostles themselves.

It probably should not have been surprising, therefore, that episcopal opposition to communism was more pointedly directed against its atheism and anti-religious bias than against its suppression of the kind of basic human rights that are constitutionally guaranteed in liberal democracies.

In the 1930s a conservative Spanish hierarchy actively supported the

anti-communist, pro-church but fascist and anti-human-rights regime of Francisco Franco.

In the 1980s a conservative hierarchy in Argentina did not openly oppose a military junta accused, among other things, of dropping nuns and other people out of helicopters into the ocean — for reasons of "national security."

In the same decade, a Nicaraguan hierarchy, under conservative leadership, opposed the left-wing Sandinista regime, but had not opposed with equal vigor the corrupt and oppressive right-wing Somoza regime it had replaced.

The same pattern is revealing itself again in Haiti, where 10 of the 11 Catholic bishops seem more resistant to the progressive Catholics who are active in the battle for human rights than to the military dictators who are crushing the Haitian people under foot.

A recent *New York Times* report (July 24) notes that the progressive wing of Haiti's Catholic Church, acting through a national network of base communities, is under constant assault by the illegitimate government and is "largely shunned by its own church hierarchy."

Many priests have been forced into hiding or been arrested and beaten, sometimes even while presiding at Mass. Many more lay people, suspected of supporting ousted President Aristide, have been killed. Which is why so many thousands of Haitians have been flocking to U.S. shores by whatever means.

"The Roman Catholic Church hi-

erarchy here, however, has not been sympathetic to such problems," the *Times* reports. "Archbishop Francois-Wolff Ligond, of Port-au-Prince, who had strong ties to the Duvalier dictatorship, clashed constantly with Father Aristide, whose election he condemned from the pulpit."

One wonders if the ruling dictator General Cedras and his gang of thugs have ever been similarly denounced from that same cathedral pulpit.

Only one bishop, Willy Romelus of Jeremie, has consistently supported the work of the Catholic base communities, and twice since the coup he has been the apparent target of assassination attempts. He also has been isolated within the bishops' conference.

"Willy Romelus is our friend," nine priests said. "He loves and suffers with the poor. But the rest of the hierarchy refuses to position itself on the side of the poor, and many are reactionaries."

This is in striking contrast to the evangelical witness given by church leaders in El Salvador during the last decade, and particularly by the martyred Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, gunned down while celebrating Mass because of his outspoken defense of the poor and the powerless.

It also is in contrast to the prophetic words of a visiting bishop back in March of 1983 when he denounced the oppressive Haitian government and congratulated all those "who are defending the rights of the poor."

That bishop's name was John Paul II.

St. Mary of Fidelity, patron of working mothers

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

I recently returned to my hometown of Rochester, N.Y., for the 70th birthday of my mother, Mary Cornelia (McCarthy) Pierce. My mom is the kind of lay "saint" that the church always talks about finding but never gets around to canonizing.

Now, it might seem a bit self-serving to push one's own mother's sanctity. But for the record, I'd just like to give her qualifications for inclusion in the communion of saints. (If my mom were to be canonized, she might be called St. Mary of Fidelity, and they could make her the patron saint of working mothers.)

Mom was the second-youngest of eight living children. Her father died when he was 52, but her mother lived to be 93. As a young, single, working woman during the early '40s, my



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mother would hand her entire paycheck over to her widowed mother, receiving \$2 a week back for herself. Years later, Mom either visited or

talked on the telephone to her mother virtually every day of Grandma's long life.

My mom has been equally faithful to her marriage vows. She met and married the guy of her dreams at a USO dance during World War II, and 48 years later, she is still in love and married to the same man.

Mom has also been a faithful mother. By that I mean that she always has been there for her eight children. Her motto is, "There's nothing that you can do that is so awful that you cannot come home. (And several of us have tested her on that statement.)"

The reason I propose her as the saint of working mothers is that she has worked faithfully both inside and outside the home. For 25 years, she stayed at home as the primary caregiver. When her youngest were in their teens, she then went to work with

my father — first as a real estate saleswoman and then as the co-owner and gift buyer for Logos, a Christian bookstore.

During all that time, Mary Pierce was a pious, faithfilled and faithful Christian. She volunteered as a Cub Scout den mother, the head of her parish social-action committee, the organizer of suburban donations to an inner-city thrift shop. She made Cursillo, protested the war in Vietnam, and took assorted teenagers, priests, nuns, colleagues and friends under her generous wings.

Her fidelity really struck home to me recently when I was trying to remember the little prayer I used to say as a child every night before going to bed. She remembered it word for word. "Wow," I said, "how could you remember that so perfectly?"

"I still say it every night before I go to bed," she said simply.

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