

'95 will be good for the church if ...

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

As another year begins, many readers will have repeated more than once the cliché, that the older one gets, the more quickly the years seem to pass.

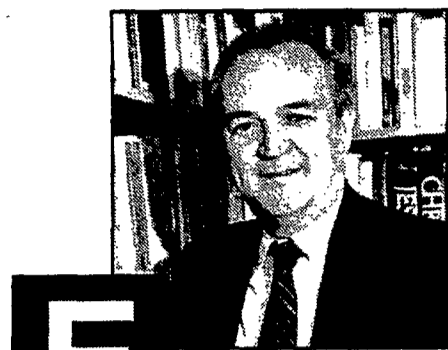
Not so long ago many lived by another cliché — a philosophical one — that, with the passing of each year, things become inevitably better. Thus, we are smarter than those who went before us — and healthier, stronger, richer, more powerful, perhaps even holier, too.

That type of thinking was especially popular in the United States, where it was widely assumed that children would be better off, financially and in their material possessions, than their parents were.

Indeed, parents worked hard — often working at two jobs — to ensure that their sons and daughters would have a college education and be given a running start on a profitable career in business or one of the professions.

Such parents were determined that their children would not have to endure the hardships and make the sacrifices of their own and previous generations.

As most of us realize by now, the escalator to prosperity's ever-greater heights has been on the blink for some time. In an increasing number of cases, children are worse off, not better off, than their parents. The



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standard of living has flattened out.

Many young people can't make it on their own. They can't afford the rent, their car, insurance, and the like. After a period of blissfully independent living in college and later in their own apartments, they are forced by economic circumstances to move back with their parents.

If the theory of inevitable progress doesn't work for many families and for society generally, we have no reason to believe that it should work for the church either.

Consequently, when a new year rolls around, no church member has reason to assume that things are more likely to get better than to get worse.

(I doubt if many readers really have to be persuaded of that.)

But how would any of us know if 1995 turns out to be a better year for the church than 1994 was? What criteria — theological, pastoral, sociological, whatever — can we use?

I propose that 1995 will have been a better year if, on Dec. 31, 1995, we can truly say that many of us were more practically committed to the Gospel than we were in 1994: that we were more generous to those who needed our help; more forgiving of those who have offended us; more patient with those who antagonized us; more tolerant of those who differed with us; more just toward those with a claim upon us; more caring of those who depended upon us; more supportive of those who needed our encouragement; and more truthful when the rights and reputations of others were at stake.

It will have been a better year for the church in 1995 if presiders and other ministers of the Eucharist helped to make the liturgy a more spiritually engaging experience for us all, if homilies were better prepared and more pertinent to our lives, if the reception of holy Communion bound us more closely with Christ and to one another in Christ, if the celebrations of all the sacraments were more spiritually meaningful and fruitful, building a stronger Christian community more committed than ever to its mis-

sion of service to others.

It will have been a better year for the church in 1995 if its leaders — lay and clerical alike — were more compelling examples and witnesses of the Gospel (in their words, their actions, and their lifestyles), if they exercised their authority more for service than for control, if they were more loving and more compassionate, and less self-righteous and less judgmental, toward others, if they spoke and acted more honestly, with deeper understanding, with greater sensitivity, and in a more authentically human manner.

It will have been a better year for the church in 1995 if battered women, neglected and abused children, drug addicts and alcoholics, the homeless, the separated and divorced, gays and lesbians, lapsed and alienated Catholics, the physically and psychologically disabled, and others similarly marginalized by society and religious bodies alike received more attentive, more caring, more generous, more effective forms of Christian ministry.

This week's column has suggested only a few criteria by which to measure the church's progress in the new year. Readers will surely think of their own.

One hopes that we might also ponder the ways and means by which each of us could personally contribute to improving the church in 1995.

Let the meditation begin.

God's words give spirit and life

Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21; (R1) Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:12-30.

In its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican II stated: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord" (#21). That's a startling statement, for the church is saying that she puts God's inspired word on par with the most holy Eucharist.

In Sunday's first reading, Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the Jews; it was the feast of Tabernacles about 398 B.C.

The feast of Tabernacles was one of the most popular among God's people. It was a reminder of the time when their ancestors lived in the desert for 40 years in tents (tabernacles). The feast had a Mardi Gras spirit to it. Remember it was on this feast that the woman was taken in adultery and brought to Jesus.

Later, the feast was also used to celebrate September's fall harvest, creating another reason for rejoicing.

The liturgy for the feast consisted of reading the law, interpreting it, and renewing the covenant with God. Ezra



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is credited with originating the synagogue service. The service consisted of prayers, two readings from Scriptures and a priestly blessing. One of the readings was from the law of Moses, read by a doctor of the law or a scribe and commented on; the other was from one of the prophets, read by anyone over age 30 and commented on, as Jesus did in the Gospel.

Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." Jesus had just experienced the Spirit's power at His baptism and in His

clash with the devil in the desert. He had brought glad tidings to the poor (to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman). And at that very moment, He was proclaiming liberty and a year of favor from the Lord.

The people were in a state of depression when Ezra spoke. His words brought rejoicing. When Jesus spoke, the people were like sheep without a shepherd. His words showed them the way to life. In both instances, God's word lifted up the people's spirits. "Your words, Lord, are spirit and life" (Response). God's words give spirit and life.

Today, the family is one of Satan's two targets. He is breaking up marriages. He is creating dissension between husbands and wives, parents and children. The defense against this onslaught is family prayer, especially the family rosary, and family Bible reading.

In the messages purported to be given by Our Lady at Medjugorje, Mary repeatedly asks for family prayer and Bible reading. "Dear children! ... Every family must pray and read the Bible" (2/14/85). To Jelena: "I'm going to reveal a spiritual secret to you: if you want to be stronger than evil, make yourself a plan of personal prayer. Take a certain time in the

morning, read a text from Holy Scripture, anchor the Divine word in your heart, and strive to live it during the day, particularly during the moment of trials. In this way, you will be stronger than evil (4/19/84). "Dear children, I ask you to read the Bible in your homes every day. Place it in a visible place there, where it will always remind you to read it and to pray" (10/18/84).

"Place it in a visible place" — the Bible is a unique book: It is the word of God, inspired by Him; He is its author. Therefore, it must not be treated as any other book. It must not be put on a bookshelf with other books. Rather, it should be laid open on a table set aside just for the Bible. The table could be the home altar: with a crucifix, a rosary, an image of the Sacred Heart and one of Mary, and a bottle of holy water (a bug repellent; the devils are the bugs) — all on this table-altar.

Assign a family member each week the task of turning a page of the Bible each day and pick out a quote to bring to the supper table. For a wedding gift, give a Bible. For graduation, give a Bible; for children, give a picture Bible.

"Your words, Lord, are spirit and life."

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