

## What makes an institution Catholic?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

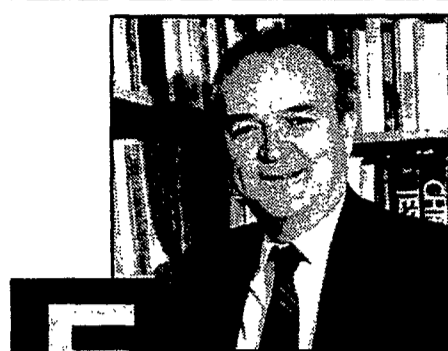
Debates have been going on for years in Catholic colleges and universities about Catholic identity. Sometimes the debates are framed in such a way that the line between "Catholic" and "Jesuit," for example, becomes blurred. Concern for Catholic identity can function as a code for the concern of the university's sponsoring religious community to maintain effective administrative control over the institution.

The case of Catholic hospitals is somewhat different because, in an increasing number of instances, all members of the sponsoring religious community are already gone, or reduced to nominal representation on the hospital's board of directors.

Does a Catholic institution necessarily become less Catholic when the sponsoring religious community's numerical presence is diminished, and does the institution cease to be Catholic entirely once all of the sisters, priests, and brothers have departed?

The answer, one would like to think, is self-evident. While religious communities have been a significant part of the Catholic Church for centuries, they are not essential to it. Throughout the first Christian millennium, in fact, there were no religious orders and yet the church was still Catholic.

The church is the whole People of God. And it is more than that. It is



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

the tradition and the value-system, rooted in the person of Jesus Christ and the Gospel He proclaimed, which have been formative of that people from the beginning.

A university or a hospital, therefore, can remain Catholic, even after the last women religious, priests, or brothers have closed the door behind them. What is required for Catholicity is a sufficient number of committed Catholics to maintain an institution's life and mission in a manner consistent with the Catholic tradition and its central values.

I have no intention here to diminish the significance of the role such religious communities play, or have played, in such institutions. Surely, an institution's Catholic identity is en-

hanced and strengthened by the religious community's ongoing, vital presence.

But if and when that community can no longer maintain an effective presence, or even any mathematical presence at all, that doesn't necessarily signal the end of the institution's Catholic identity.

Indeed, one can show from the historical record that the presence or absence of the sponsoring religious community in a Catholic hospital doesn't always make a difference to the hospital's Catholic identity — seen always now in terms of the Catholic tradition and its values.

Unfortunately, there have been too many instances where Catholic hospitals, still administered and staffed by members of the sponsoring religious community, have violated the rights of hospital employees through "hard-ball" efforts to prevent the establishment of a labor union and to punish those who try.

Monsignor George Higgins, one of the church's outstanding defenders of the labor union movement, has given us several unhappy examples in his autobiography, "Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a 'Labor Priest'" (Paulist Press, 1993).

The *National Catholic Reporter* has given us another, more recent example: Mercy Community Hospital in Port Jervis, N.Y., whose president is a layman, not a sister.

Is that hospital less Catholic today because its chief executive officer isn't

a member of the sponsoring religious community?

No, it's less Catholic because the hospital apparently doesn't abide by the Catholic Church's social teachings regarding the natural right of workers to unionize, even though its lay president claims that the hospital has acted "morally and ethically, in accordance with the teachings of the church."

Self-serving rhetoric of that sort makes one think of the tobacco industry captains who piously insisted a few months ago — before a Congressional committee — that their product is non-addictive. And they said so under oath.

During the discussion of a recent episcopal statement on women at the U.S. Catholic bishops' meeting in November, William E. McManus, retired bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., put the issue in its proper context: "What we proclaim from the housetops we should practice in-house."

In the end, Catholic institutional identity has less to do with sponsoring religious communities and quotas of Catholic faculty and staff than it does with the actual practice of Catholic values by and within the institution.

Catholic universities, colleges, hospitals, high schools, parochial schools, and bishops' offices alike could start with the social encyclicals and their straightforward, no-excuses teaching about the right of workers to unionize.

## Calls to vocation need not be 'heavenly'

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 5:1-11; (R1) Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

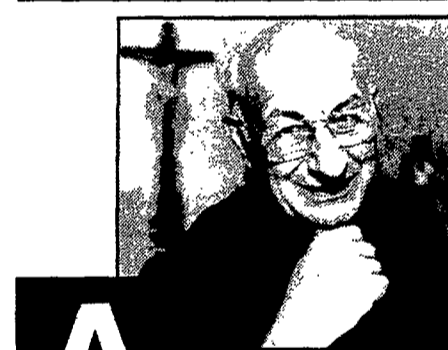
Sunday's readings are about two vocations: Isaiah's vocation and the vocation of the first four apostles.

Isaiah lived during the eighth century B.C. King Uzziah died during the year 742 B.C. That same year, Isaiah was standing outside the temple, near the altar of sacrifice. The temple's doors were opened and the veil hiding the Holy of Holies was parted. Isaiah saw God represented as an Eastern monarch. He sat on a high and lofty throne and his garment's train filled the temple — the long flowing robe was the badge of dignity in the East. His ministers of state were the seraphim, the highest of the nine choirs of angels.

The seraphim chanted that God is holy — thrice holy, that is, superlatively so.

Holiness is simply a persevering love of goodness. God is love. God is good. And God loves the good that he is — eternally. Therefore, He is thrice holy.

To point out this attribute of God at



### A WORD FOR SUNDAY

this time in history was particularly timely. For Uzziah had been struck with leprosy precisely because he was irreverent and did not respect God's holiness. Uzziah had dared one day to snatch the censer from the high priest's hand and enter the Holy of Holies himself. For this, God struck him with leprosy. This same irreverence had infected the people of Israel so Isaiah's vocation was to proclaim God's holiness to king and people —

all sinners.

All colors look alike in the dark; we only see the imperfections, the mars and the blotches in the light. So Isaiah, in God's presence of light, cried out, "Woe is me. For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips."

The same thing happened to Peter. When the miracle of the catch of fish made him realize he was in the presence of divinity, he fell at Jesus's knees and said, "Leave me, Lord. I am a sinful man."

As an angel purified Isaiah for his work, so Jesus told the apostles, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men."

We all know of the shortage of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life in our country. Perhaps some are expecting that a religious vocation will come to them as it did to Isaiah and the apostles — by direct heavenly intervention.

A beautiful painting of St. Augustine holding hands with his mother St. Monica hangs in London's National Gallery. Tradition says that at this moment, Augustine said to Monica, "Oh, that God would speak to us!" Monica answered, "My son, perhaps He is speaking to us."

God is speaking to our youths today. He is calling them to the priesthood and the religious life, but they are not listening because they may be expecting some heavenly intervention.

A person has a vocation if he or she has a good intention and the three H's: good health, a good head, and a good heart. The good intention does not necessarily mean an attraction for the religious life. Attractions are feelings, yet feelings are poor barometers for religious life. If there is the desire to save souls, to serve God — that is enough. A lad was asked, "Why do you want to be a priest?" He answered, "Because I don't want to go to heaven alone."

A good heart means having no bad habit or sin unconquered. A good head means having average intelligence — like the fishermen — and also having their industry and application. Good health means having no serious physical malady that would prevent ministry. That is all one needs to have to enter the priesthood or religious life.

Christ is knocking at the door of our youths' hearts. But the handle is on the inside. He does not crash down the door. He wants us to open it ourselves.

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