

## Church must practice what it preaches

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

It is a sign of the times that many Catholics today are looking for reasons to remain in the church in the face of forces — real or imagined — that seem to be pushing them out.

Catholics who assume an all-is-well posture will not readily grasp the point of the preceding paragraph, and some will resent its even being stated. But denying what has been going on will not make the problem go away.

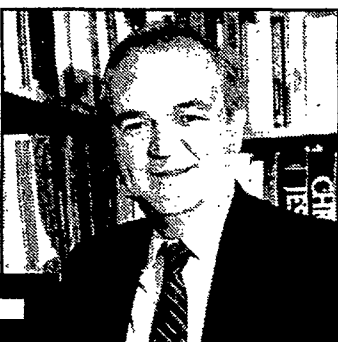
What is to be said about this unhappy phenomenon?

Theologically, the only legitimate reason to leave the church, understood as the Body of Christ and the community of his disciples, is a loss of faith in Jesus Christ.

If one no longer believes that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that his promise of eternal life is worthy of our hope, and that his Gospel of love, peace, justice, and mercy gives shape and direction to all human life, then one doesn't belong in a church that confesses the Lordship of Jesus, that holds high the lamp of hope in eternal life, and that proclaims and attempts to practice his Gospel.

But you can probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of Catholics who have "left the church" because of a loss of faith in Jesus Christ.

Many, if not most, "leave" the church today for the same kind of rea-



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

sons that Catholics "left" the church in the 1950s before there was a Second Vatican Council.

They find themselves off the Catholic reservation because of some violation of, or conflict with, its marriage laws. Or they were dealt harshly with by a priest. Or they suffered some real or perceived injustice at the hands of church officials or representatives, in a parish, a diocesan office, a school, a hospital, or other Catholic agency.

Many of these Catholics remain Catholic at heart (what some have called "communal Catholics"), but they no longer feel welcome or at home in the so-called institutional church, that is, the church of laws and

regulations, articulated and enforced by the Vatican, most bishops, and many clergy.

To bring such Catholics "back" to the church, it would be pointless to try and convince them — by outreach campaigns of various sorts — that God is a loving Father or that Jesus is a forgiving Savior, or even that Mary is a compassionate Mother.

Their problem is not with God, or Jesus, or Mary. Their problem is with the church — or at least that aspect of the church governed by clerics who insist that its rules and regulations are either divinely mandated or so time-honored that they can never be changed, much less eliminated.

"The first means of evangelization," Pope Paul VI declared in what was perhaps his best and most enduring papal document, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ("Evangelization in the Modern World"), "is the witness of an authentically Christian life."

"Modern men and women," he insisted, "listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

In other words, the church has to practice what it preaches about love, justice, mercy, and compassion if it is to gain any hearing from those outside the church, or from those who have left the church, or from those who are close to leaving the church.

To practice justice, for example, the church must rectify injustices against

Catholic school teachers for whom the social teachings of the church are a dead letter, and defend their right to unionize, if they so desire, even against the well-funded power of anti-union law firms employed and directed by the local bishop.

To practice justice, the church must stand up for Catholic hospital employees who have been beaten down by withering anti-union blasts, orchestrated by the same types of anti-union law firms at the direction and in the pay of Catholic hospital administrators.

To practice justice, in the final accounting, the church must demonstrate that it is so serious about its commitment to Jesus Christ and his Gospel that it is willing to sacrifice, if necessary, its own institutional and financial well-being for the sake of the human dignity and rights of others, in particular of those who are in its employ at whatever level and in whatever ministerial capacity.

Make no mistake about it: this isn't an easy thing for the church to do. To act justly is to put much humanly at risk.

When the rich young man asked Jesus how he could obtain eternal life, he got an answer he didn't want to hear; that is, to sell all that he had and to give the money to the poor.

The Scripture says that "when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich" (Luke 18:23).

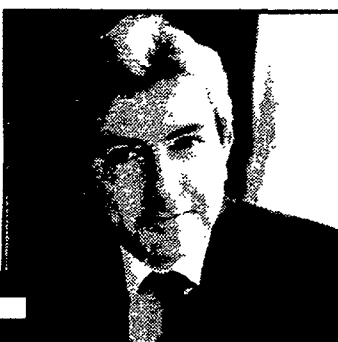
## Sometimes enough isn't always enough

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

You have never done enough. You have already done enough.

One of the reasons I think Jesus believed and taught this contradiction is that it explains so many Gospel stories I have always had a tough time understanding.

Take, for example, the one about the prodigal son. Here we have a kid who does every possible thing to hurt his father, yet when he returns repentant he is thrown a party in celebration. He had already done enough to win his father's love. The older son had stayed by his father, helping him with the family business, never asking anything in return. When he balked at forgiving his brother, however, his fa-



### FAITH AND WORK

ther told him, in effect: "Son, you have

never done enough. You must rejoice in your brother's salvation, even though he did you wrong."

Another example of this contradiction in Jesus' teaching is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector at prayer. Despite the fact that the Pharisee did everything the law required and more, he had not done enough in Jesus' eyes. The tax collector, according to Jesus, went away "justified" simply by admitting he was a sinner.

The rich young man's mistake was in telling Jesus he had kept all the commandments since he was a youth. Jesus' response was that he still hadn't done enough: "sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor," Jesus told him. With the woman caught in adultery, however, it was enough that

she "go and sin no more."

How else are we to understand the parable of the workers hired at different hours who were all paid the same wage? Those who might have worried that they hadn't done enough learned they had. Those who felt they had done more than their share had not ... at least according to Jesus.

Martha's mistake? She didn't think she had done enough.

Peter's mistake? He thought forgiving his brother seven times was enough.

If you've got stories or insights from your own lives that show that we have never done enough, and yet at the same time we have already done enough, please send them to me at 4848 N. Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. 60640. I'll use them as the basis for future columns during the year.



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