

Today's church calls on all members to serve

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

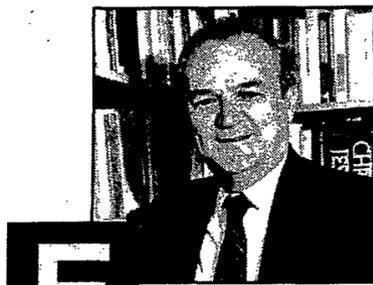
Among the various erroneous theories floating about the Catholic Church, two in particular need to be challenged; first, that the extraordinary number of lay ministers active in the church today is a function of the shortage of priests and religious; and, second, that the church is weaker, less vital now than it was in the years before Vatican II.

Those who embrace the first theory assume that if the Catholic Church suddenly had a resurgence of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, there would no longer be any need for lay persons to serve as directors of religious education, catechists, youth ministers, eucharistic ministers, lectors, liturgy directors, pastoral associates, and so forth.

The laity would go back to what they were doing before the council, helping the priests and women religious fulfill the ministerial work that is rightfully and exclusively theirs.

Thus, if we had a sufficient number of women religious for catechesis, there would no longer be a place for laity in religious education, except perhaps to help women religious prepare children for first Communion and confirmation, as lay women did before Vatican II.

And if we had a sufficient number of priests to assist the celebrant in the distribution of holy Communion, laity



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would be withdrawn from that ministry at once.

Those who embrace the second theory assume that the Catholic Church before 1962, the year the council began, was institutionally stronger and more spiritually healthy than it is today. They base that assumption largely on statistics, particularly on the decline in attendance at Mass.

Although there is some superficial evidence to feed these assumptions and the theories they generate, anyone who looks more closely at the actual pastoral situation in the Catholic Church today and who reflects more deeply on its theology and doctrine, especially as they apply to the mystery of the church, will not be misled by

certain appearances to the contrary.

Early last month, for example, a convocation of 1,400 women and men who are members of parish pastoral or finance councils in the Archdiocese of Boston met at Boston College High School to engage in future pastoral planning. Cardinal Bernard Law, the archbishop of Boston, addressed the gathering.

Although the cardinal has had over the years the reputation of a hard-line conservative, his words on this occasion (not to mention his pastorally sensitive response to the recent tragic murders at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Boston) serve as a reminder that there is still much common ground between conservatives, progressives, and moderate middle-of-the-roads in the Catholic Church.

In his talk the cardinal emphasized the inclusiveness of the church. "We are the church," he began. "Together we are the church; the pastors are not the church; the religious women and religious men in our midst who serve with such self-dedication and sacrifice and love, they are not the church, nor is the laity alone the church, but all of us together constitute the church."

Younger readers may not know this, and some older readers may have forgotten, but the common equivalent for the noun "church" in the years before Vatican II was "hierarchy." By extension it also included priests and women religious.

Laity "attended" church. Laity were

loyal "to" the church. Laity made generous sacrifices "for" the church. Laity received the sacraments and moral guidance "from" the church.

But "the church" was always something to which they belonged, to which they contributed services and resources, and from which they derived spiritual benefits in return.

Cardinal Law reminded his audience in Boston that we are all the church — laity, religious, and clergy alike, as the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church stated it (n.30).

"What I want you to understand from my point of view," he continued, "is that planning is not driven by an obsessive fear that we have too few priests.

"We don't have as many as we used to. But the church today isn't the same as it was 50 years ago. Look around, 1,400 people did not gather together 50 years ago to plan the future of this archdiocese; it didn't work that way. There's vibrancy, there's life here, there's no turning back.

"So let me tell you, you are not here because there's a shortage of priests. You are here because this is the way the church ought to operate.

"And if there were four priests in every parish in this archdiocese, I hope to God we would be together today just the same as we would if that were the case."

This writer could not improve upon those words or the theology that undergirds them.

Feast can remove temporal punishment of sin

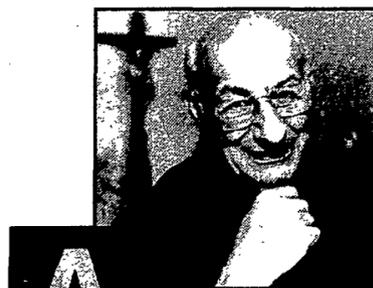
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-31; (R1) Acts 5:12-16; (R2) Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19.

Sister Mary Faustina Kowalska, beatified by the church on April 18, 1993, was asked by our Lord to pray and work toward establishing a feast of the Divine Mercy on the Sunday after Easter. Jesus said to her: "On that day, the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession (eight days before or after) and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and punishment" (Diary 699).

The Sunday after Easter is the second Sunday of Easter. The Gospel on this Sunday by a wonderful coincidence is the one about the institution of the sacrament of reconciliation. Jesus called this sacrament the one of His Mercy.

He said: "When you go to confession, to this fountain of mercy, the Blood and Water which came forth from My Heart always flow down upon your soul ... In the Tribunal of Mercy (the sacrament of Reconcilia-



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tion) ... the greatest miracles take place and are incessantly repeated ... Here the misery of the soul meets the God of Mercy ...

"Come with faith to the feet of My representative ... I Myself am waiting there for you. I am only hidden by the priest ... I Myself act in your soul ... Make your confession before Me. The person of the priest is, for Me, only a screen.

"Were a soul like a decaying corpse, so that from a human standpoint, there would be no hope of restora-

tion ... it is not so with God ... If their trust is great, there is no limit to My generosity."

In conjunction with confession and Communion for the feast of Mercy, there must be acts of mercy, "to your neighbor always and everywhere, which arise out of love for Me."

To observe this feast, then, we must do four things:

1. Celebrate the feast on the Sunday after Easter.
2. Go to confession eight days before or after the feast.
3. Receive holy Communion within the same time period.
4. Be merciful to others, through actions, words and prayers on their behalf.

A few observations. First, Our Lord promised that confession within this feast would take away not only sins, but also the temporal punishment due to them. That is a tremendous act of mercy. As you know, confession obtains the forgiveness of sins, but it does not always remove all the temporal punishment due to them. Our first parents sinned; we are still suffering from the consequences of their sin. When David committed the terrible sins of adultery and murder, the prophet Nathan told him: "The Lord has forgiven your sin; you shall not

die ... but the sword shall never depart from your house because you despised me, ... and I will bring evil upon you out of your own house ..." (1 Kgs. 12:10-11).

One reason for the temporal punishment of sin is to make us realize the magnitude of sin's evil. Another reason is that often our sorrow is not equal to the malice of our sins. A third reason is to enable us to atone for our sins and thus shorten our purgatory.

Yet, on the feast of Mercy, not only is sin forgiven by confession, but even temporal punishment is taken away.

What God wants most from us is to turn to Him with trust. And the first act of trust is to receive His mercy by going to confession. This mercy is always available to us no matter what we have done or what state we are in, even if our sins are red as scarlet and numerous as the sands of the sea. It matter not, if we trust. Trust is like a bucket. How much water you draw from a well depends on the size of the bucket; how much mercy we receive from God depends on how much we trust Him.

Confession reconciles us to God and to man. The next thing our Lord wants is that we not only receive His mercy but that we use it by being merciful to others.

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