

Opinions vary on future of ministry

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

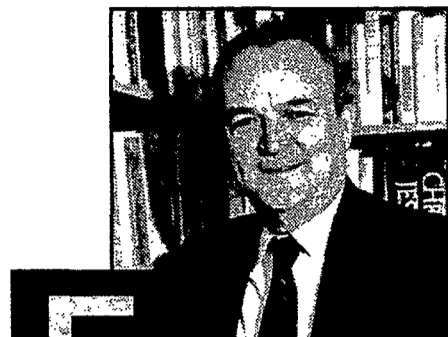
As we move closer to the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the third Christian millennium, interest and attention will turn increasingly to the Catholic Church's future and its ministries. Conferences, conventions, institutes, and workshops of various kinds have already been engaged in "future-think" for some period of time, but the pace will undoubtedly quicken over the next few years.

There are at least three schools of opinion about what is most likely to happen and how the Catholic Church should prepare for it. The first and second are extreme and unrealistic positions and, as time passes, will be more widely recognized as such. The third covers a broad area of possibilities.

The first opinion — which is hard to pin down because it is more a product of mood than of a well-argued position — is that the Catholic Church is destined for the trash bin of history, and that all speculation about, and planning for, the future is a waste of time.

Since the opinion is not based on any discernible hard evidence, it should probably be taken more as the expression of frustration and anger than as a measured guess about how things might turn out after the turn of the century.

This is not to suggest, however, that the first opinion is totally wrong about possible further setbacks to the church



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

in the next century, including an even more precipitous decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life and in Mass attendance and other forms of participation in the church's life.

The second opinion is the prevailing view among many in the hierarchy and among conservative clergy, religious, and laity. It holds that the vocations crisis is about to bottom-out, if it hasn't already, and that, with sufficient prayer, fasting, and imaginative recruitment campaigns, vocations to the priesthood and religious life will eventually return to their 1950s levels.

Its basic recommendation, in the face of much statistical and anecdotal evidence to the contrary, is: "Steady as she goes. Hold the course."

In other words, we must do nothing to alter the current institutional, structural, and disciplinary arrangements currently governing the recruitment, training, and ordination of priests.

If the first opinion tends to invent "evidence" to support its pessimistic view that the Catholic Church is about to go off the rails, the second opinion blatantly denies the evidence staring it in the face.

A forthcoming new book by Richard A. Schoenherr, professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin, "Goodbye Father" (Oxford University Press), represents the third opinion in the debate. The April 7 issue of *Commonweal* contains a generous excerpt from the book under the title, "Numbers Don't Lie: A Priesthood in Irreversible Decline."

Schoenherr's position — shared by most others who have studied the problem with any scholarly care as well as by many others who know of the problem's dimensions first-hand, in their own pastoral experience — is that the vocations crisis is not going to go away and that it is going to get even worse than it is now.

Seminary enrollments have dropped almost 60 percent in less than three decades. Between 1990-93, they had fallen by more than five percent. The trend in ordinations cannot go up as long as seminary enrollments continue to decline so relentlessly. In Schoenherr's view, the recent increases in ordinations (20 percent between 1990-93) are only minor fluctuations in the downward trend.

Poor retention of priests after ordination only adds to the problem of declining seminary enrollments. Today four out of 10 newly ordained priests are needed just to take over the ministries of young priests who resign. The other six newly ordained cannot begin to fill the vacancies created by the retirement or death of older priests.

And that situation will only get worse. Between 1966 and 2005 the median age of priests will have increased eight years. As the large numbers of priests ordained in the 1950s and 1960s reach the end of their ministries, the already limited supply of active priests will decline even more precipitously. And this at a time when the demands on priests are increasing, not decreasing.

The Catholic population is growing, especially among Asian and Hispanic Catholics, from 45 million in 1965 to a projected 74 million in 2005. Thus, while the diocesan priesthood will have declined by 40 percent between 1996 and 2005, the lay population will have increased by 65 percent.

Study after study over the last three decades have concluded that poor recruitment and retention of priests is caused, in great measure, by problems with mandatory celibacy.

The first opinion says, "What difference does it make? It's a sinking ship." The second opinion says, "Steady as she goes" — into the rocks.

Next week, more about the third opinion and its realistic options for the 21st century.

We owe a debt of gratitude to God

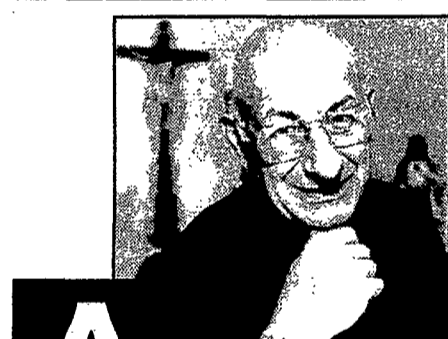
By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 14:23-29; (R1) Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; (R2) Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23.

The Gospel for the Sunday before the Ascension of our Lord is taken from Jesus' farewell address to His apostles.

Jesus told His disciples two things. First, His going away should not sadden them, because, if they love Him and keep His word, the Father would love them and both him and the Father would come to them and dwell with them. Thus the priest's greeting at Mass ("The Lord be with you") is not just a prayer, but a statement of fact; namely, that the Lord is with you, so fear not!

Secondly, His going away was not abandonment. The Father will send them the paraclete, the Holy Spirit to instruct them in everything. In the Greek the word "paraclete" means "one called to the side of another;" in Latin the word is translated as "advocate," which means the same thing: "one called to." An advocate is an attorney, one called to defend another, plead his or her case. A lawyer doesn't just stand



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

besides his client; he pleads for his client before judge and jury.

Similarly, the Holy Spirit pleads our cause before the Father and the heavenly court. At the same time He instructs us in all that Jesus taught, another reason why Jesus's going away should not distress us or make us fearful.

Because God dwells in us and the Holy Spirit is given to us, we can enjoy His peace. — one that the world

cannot give. For all these blessings, we should love God.

St. Francis of Assisi one day met a fellow who said that he had no love for God. As they walked and talked, they met a man blind from birth and crippled. Francis said to the sightless cripple, "Tell me, sir, if I were to restore your eyesight and the use of your limbs, would you love me?"

"Ah," replied the beggar, "not only would I love you, but I would be your slave for life."

"See," said Francis to the man who said he could not love God, "this man would love me if I gave him his sight and his health. Why don't you love God, who has given you your sight and your health?"

God asks the same of all of us. "Why don't you love Me? I've given you all that you are and have, not only sight and health, but life itself and the Holy Spirit, the Church, your faith and the sacraments. Why don't you love Me?"

I wonder if we realize that the object of religion is not God, for the virtue of religion is not a theological virtue, like faith, hope and charity. St. Thomas puts the virtue of religion under justice. In the Preface of the

Mass, the priest says: "*Vere dignum et iustum est*" — "It is right and just always and everywhere to give thanks to God." The object of religion is a debt — a debt we owe God for all He has given us. "What hast thou that thou hast not received?" St. Paul said.

One of the main reasons for going to Mass on Sunday is primarily to say "Thank you, God." The minimum we owe God is a "thank you" — a Eucharist. To skip Sunday Mass is to welsh on a debt we owe. If we owe the grocer, we pay our bill. Why do we not pay back to God what we owe Him? We are so quick to recognize the evils that befall us, yet so slow to recognize the blessings. Bees sip honey from flowers and hum their thanks when they leave. Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy.

To acquire a spirit of thankfulness and gratitude, we need the Holy Spirit, which always comes in response to prayer. Why not, on Friday of this week, start a novena to the Holy Spirit, like the first novena made in the Upper Room by Mary and the disciples. It need not be much, maybe seven Hail Marys each day that the Spirit come and fill your heart with His life and His love.

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