

## The church needs to breathe with 'two lungs'

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Just before the beginning of summer, at a province assembly of New England Jesuits, Father Robert Taft, longtime professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, reported on the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, in which he had participated as a delegate.

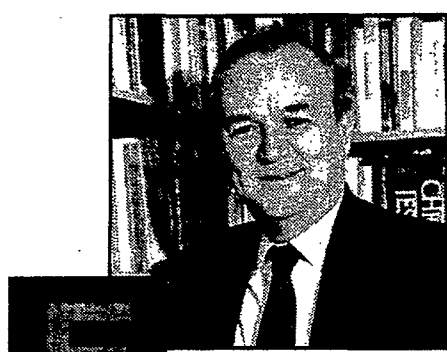
Although the talk was addressed to fellow Jesuits, it offers important theological insights that should be of interest to a much wider audience in the Church. Father Taft was one of the principal drafters of the major document on Jesuit service in the Church, and a central portion of his report focused on the theological issues that his committee had to take into account.

The first issue has to do with a "rediscovered communion ecclesiology of collegiality and coresponsibility." This refers to a concept of the Church in which local churches (dioceses, national churches, patriarchates) are as much "the Church" as is the universal Church, whose governing center is the Vatican.

A communion ecclesiology is violated when too much power is exercised at the center, at the expense of the legitimate pastoral autonomy of the local churches.

The shift away from a communion ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church followed the separation of East and West at the beginning of the second millennium.

Although many people today believe



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

that the present pope's understanding and exercise of the papal office is thoroughly Western, it is John Paul II who has repeatedly insisted that we should study and learn from the traditions of the Christian East so that the Church may once again breathe with two lungs (East and West) rather than only one. But if the pope's advice were taken to heart, Father Taft suggested, it would mean that "the Church is no longer to be identified with the pope, the Vatican, the hierarchy - nor should it be."

A second issue concerns the impact of Vatican II on the postconciliar life of the Church. Taft acknowledged that we live in an "era of internal ecclesial ferment the likes of which has not been seen since the Reformation, Trent, or

the French Revolution." But this shouldn't have surprised us. The period following an ecumenical council is almost always marked by conflict.

The Council of Nicaea in 325, which presumably settled the question of the divinity of Christ, initiated a period of near chaos in the Church until the next ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381. In the meantime, saintly bishops (like St. Athanasius) and Arian sympathizers alike were deposed, excommunicated, exiled, rehabilitated, then exiled again in dizzying order.

"To pretend that things should be any different after the momentous, world-shaking ecclesial readjustment of Catholicism operated at Vatican II is to live in a static dream world outside of history," Taft observed.

A third issue has to do with a renewed theology of the Petrine ministry (the papacy) in the light of modern New Testament scholarship, the documents of Vatican II, ecumenical contacts with the East, and historical and theological studies of the papal office.

Father Taft's point is hardly subtle. The papacy of the first millennium, when the Church was breathing with two lungs (East and West), was closer to the New Testament ideal than the papacy of the second millennium, when the Church has been breathing with one (Western) lung.

If the central governing structures of the third millennium are to be more reflective of both traditions, they will become once again more respectful of the legitimate pastoral autonomy of

the local churches. Bishops conferences, not the Roman Curia, will determine what is best for their own local churches.

A fourth issue concerns the role of the hierarchical magisterium in the Church. In praising the careful scholarship of fellow Jesuit Francis Sullivan, author of the book, "Magisterium" (Paulist Press), Father Taft warned against simplistic and excessive notions of official teaching authority.

"Anyone who knows church history," he pointed out, "could bring forward numerous irrefutably documented historical instances of clear and authoritative supreme magisterial pronouncements to which no one would dream of assenting today."

Finally, regarding the very concept of authority itself, "the only absolute authority in the Church or anywhere else is that of God," Father Taft said. No other authority, not even one that is exercised in the name of God, is absolute. As such it is subject to error and can - and sometimes must - be opposed in conscience.

If we feel free to criticize the unjust and sometimes criminal behavior of popes and bishops of the past, Father Taft reminded us, "it is only because they were criminal and unjust while they were alive; they did not become so only after death."

Those still breathing with only one Western lung may enter upon a spasm of coughing over such thoughts. Those breathing with two lungs, as the pope says we must, should not miss a breath.

## A cherished mentor is honored

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

One of my many mentors, Dr. Russell Barta, was honored recently with the Hillenbrand Award for Social Justice, given annually by the Hillenbrand Institute of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

His recognition was the opportunity for me to reflect upon the importance of mentors in my life and upon my relatively new role as a mentor for others.

Daniel Levinson, in his groundbreaking book on male adult development, "The Seasons of a Man's Life," says that "The mentor relationship is one of the most complex, and developmentally important, a man can have in early adulthood."

This has been true in my own life. At every important moment of my adult life, it seems there has been someone there - usually male, always older -



### FAITH AND WORK

open to sharing with me what I needed to learn at that particular point in my development.

I ran into Barta, for example, in my

thirties, when I was trying to understand what it means to be a confident and competent adult Catholic layman. Barta was the founding president of the National Center for the Laity. Through both his words and example, he taught me the importance of keeping my eye on the primary role of the laity, which is how we carry out our Christian faith in our daily lives - on our jobs, with our families, and in our communities.

It was Barta who pointed out to me the pitfalls for the laity in getting too caught up in internal church matters. "Don't spend so much time worrying about what the institutional church is or is not doing," he would say. "Worry about how you and your fellow Catholics are carrying out Christ's mission in and to the world."

Barta has made his contribution to that mission in a variety of ways. He was the first director of adult educa-

tion of the Archdiocese of Chicago and a professor for many years at Mundelein College, where he helped develop the Department of Religious Studies.

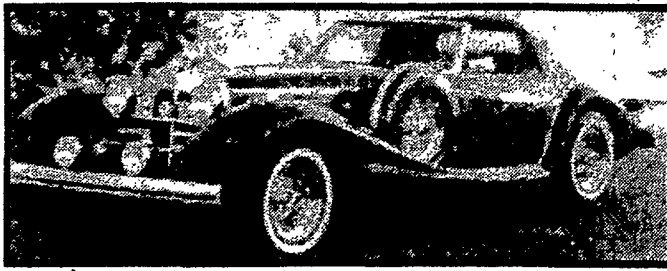
Probably unbeknownst to them, Russ Barta and his wife, Bernice, have also served as role models for my wife, Kathy, and I for how to live a faithful and faith-filled Christian marriage - one in which both partners held onto their own individuality while loving the other unconditionally and at the same time raising a bunch of great kids.

Now, at age 47, I find myself being asked to mentor people in their twenties and thirties. I realize that this is part of a never-ending Christian tradition, one that goes on under the surface all of the time - unheralded yet irreplaceable.

I thank Russ Barta for mentoring me in this task also.

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TO BE GIVEN AWAY ON SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4TH, 1995