

# COLUMNISTS

## Church needs data on shifts in priesthood

**Father Richard P. McBrien**  
Syndicated columnist

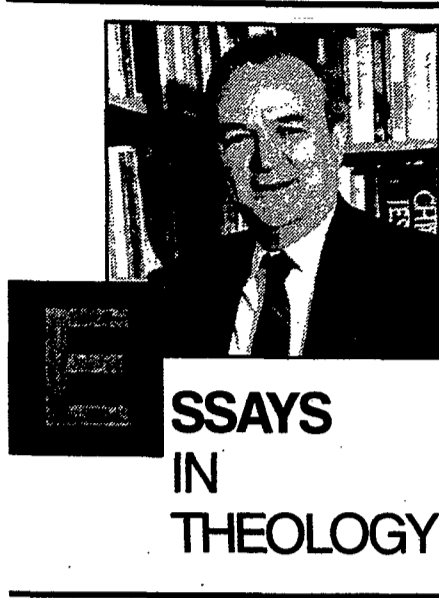
Leading up to last week's papal visit to the United States, the electronic and print media were on the phone and on the road, camera crews in tow, to get an angle on its significance. To do that, they asked about current and likely future developments in the Catholic Church.

When the subject turned not only to the declining numbers of priests but also to the changing profile of seminarians and newly ordained priests, frustration set in because one has to rely for the most part on hearsay.

Yes, a few studies in recent years have indicated that today's seminarians tend to be more conservative theologically and spiritually than those of previous generations. But most of what we know about the situation is at the level of anecdotal evidence.

If the Catholic Church is to be truly prepared for the pastoral needs of the 21st century, however, it must have at its disposal as much hard evidence as it can gather, based on careful and comprehensive scientific surveys. These surveys, in turn, would have to be generously funded, and the professionals who conduct them would have to have a completely free hand in constructing the surveys and in interpreting and publishing the results.

No questions can be ruled out of order in advance, no paths of inquiry antecedently blocked off, no unsettling findings hidden under the proverbial bushel basket. The whole church, not



just the bishops, has a tremendous stake in the matter.

We may speak these days about priestless parishes, administered by religious women or lay persons, but no Catholic can countenance a priestless church. The ordained priesthood is essential to its life and mission. The question, therefore, is not whether we shall have priests, but how many and of what kind.

Ample and widespread anecdotal evidence, drawn mainly from seminary faculty members and staff, suggest that the decline in the quantity of candidates is not the only or the most serious problem facing seminaries today.

The real concern is with the type of candidate being admitted. Anecdotal

evidence says many are rigid, clerical, authoritarian, asexual or homosexual, anti-intellectual, and pietistic (as opposed to authentically spiritual).

If the anecdotal evidence is wrong, there should be some way — apart from merely contrary anecdotal evidence — of challenging and displacing it once and for all.

In the meantime, many seminarians, good and bad alike, are being tarred with the same broad brush. Many excellent, well-balanced, highly motivated, sexually integrated, profoundly spiritual men indeed are still being attracted to the priesthood. But the anecdotal evidence is that many of these are leaving or have left seminaries because of the negative environment and atmosphere they find there, especially in the student bodies. Is this anecdotal evidence in error?

Which candidates, in fact, are most likely to leave the seminary once admitted, and why? Has the church been losing only those who should never have been admitted to the seminary in the first place, or has the church been losing candidates of high quality because of failures in the seminaries themselves? We have yet to determine the answers — beyond anecdotal evidence, that is.

We also hear a lot these days about young priests who frustrate their seasoned, middle-aged pastors because of their rigid orthodoxy, uptight clericalism, and their difficulty in relating to women. The pastors find themselves in the middle, between the new priest and the complaining parishioners who find

it nearly impossible to work with him.

At the other end, we also hear about young priests — ordained only two, three, or four years — leaving the priesthood to marry. What explains this phenomenon?

Then there is the exceedingly sensitive issue of homosexuality in the priesthood. Is the proportion of homosexuals in the priesthood higher today than it was before 1965? 1975? 1985?

People throw around percentages, sometimes as high as 30, 40, or even 50 percent, but is there any way of verifying those percentages? If not, what basis does anyone have for speculating in that manner?

Anecdotal evidence again? But how do you derive even anecdotal evidence about something like that?

We could also use some hard evidence that establishes a correlation, if such exists, between the number and kind of candidates for the priesthood and the theological and spiritual profile of their respective diocesan bishops.

To what extent are ultra-conservative bishops attracting a bumper crop of ultra-conservative seminarians, and to what extent is the declining number of moderate bishops affecting the decline in the number and quality of vocations to the priesthood?

Many continue to insist that the vocations crisis is spiritual rather than systemic, that it can be brought to an end through prayer and fasting rather than through a change in the discipline of obligatory celibacy, for example.

We could use some hard evidence for that, too.

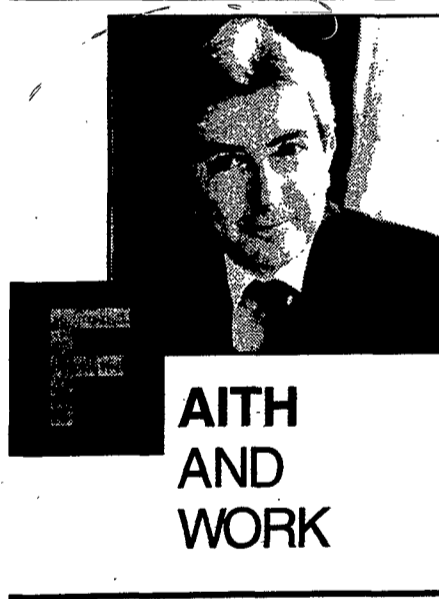
## Gospel instructs us to act on causes of injustice

**By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce**  
Syndicated columnist

One of the things I like about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular is that you are never able to go for very long without being confronted by the church's social teachings.

For example, the Gospel reading for a recent Sunday was the parable from Luke about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. Our presider that Sunday was from India, and he gave an absolutely stirring homily on the nature of social justice.

The problem with the rich man, he told us, was not that he was not charitable to Lazarus. After all, he did let Lazarus sit by the gate to his house day after day. He could have called the police and had Lazarus dragged away.



But he did not. Perhaps he even kept

Lazarus around as an easy and obvious recipient of his charity.

The sin of the rich man, the priest told us, was that he never once tried to get at the root cause of Lazarus' condition. He never offered Lazarus a job, never attempted to change the social system of his time, which forced people like Lazarus to beg to survive.

I live in a middle-class, even well-to-do parish, and as I looked around at my fellow parishioners I wondered how many of them were feeling as uncomfortable as I was. Could any of us say we had tried hard enough to eliminate the poverty we all see about us every day? Were we all guilty of thinking that our charitable giving absolved us of responsibility to do more for the Lazaruses of our world?

Just then, I noticed an elderly man in

the pew in front of me scribbling furiously on his donation envelope. He was very properly dressed and looked to be in his 80s. Was he protesting the priest's sermon, I wondered? Did he object to the use of the pulpit to spread this radical interpretation of the Gospel?

God will forgive me, but I peeked over his shoulder. This is what he had written in his shaky handwriting: "Father, please excuse me for not doing more, but I have been very ill (sick) for the past year."

Here was a priest from India telling us affluent Americans that we can never have done enough to respond to the teachings of Jesus, and here was this old man, frail and sick himself, agreeing.

That's one more thing I like about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular.

### Kids answers

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- 3 readiness to preach the good news
- 7 to stand against the devil's tricks
- 6 word of God
- 5 salvation
- 4 faith
- 2 righteousness
- 1 truth

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