

COLUMNISTS

Media often ignore vitality in the church

Every time the pope makes a pastoral visit to the United States, the media pose the usual questions about the crisis in the Catholic Church: sexual morality, ordination of women, the priest shortage, and the like.

It's not that the media have a one-track mind. They just don't seem to know what else to ask.

During the pope's most recent visit to America last month, there were signs of a more imaginative approach here and there. I single out the *New York Times*, not because it was the only newspaper, magazine, or television network that broke out of the usual mold, but because it was one source that caught my attention.

The *Times* did report on the decline in priestly vocations, for example, and also did some insightful analyses of the pope's speeches, correctly picking up on the pope's refreshingly non-polemical, yet powerfully prophetic, words about America's historic obligations to immigrants and the poor.

Where the *Times* really excelled, however, was in its generous coverage of flesh-and-blood Catholics and of their parish communities throughout the New York and New Jersey area. These articles reminded readers that the Catholic Church is more than its gov-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ernment.

The *Times* discovered what anyone who travels the United States already knows: that there is a vibrancy and a vitality in the church that has been heretofore hidden from, or largely ignored by, media and commentators.

Although perhaps not one in 10,000 Catholics has read all, most, or even some of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the council has had a profound impact on the lives of active Catholics.

Whether or not these Catholics are even aware of the existence of the council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, for example, the manner in which they worship each week has that document's stamp all over it.

The Mass is now in the vernacular.

The priest faces the people. And the laity are involved in every important aspect of the celebration, including the proclamation of the word of God and the distribution of Holy Communion.

The council has also changed the way most Catholics look at, and relate to non-Catholics, Christian and non-Christian alike, and it has directly engaged lay people in the life and governance of their local church, through parish councils and an extraordinary proliferation of ministries.

The council, alas, has also given this highly educated laity a new sense of personal responsibility in matters of faith and conscience. Although still guided by the Gospel and by the teaching authority of the church, laity are less likely now, than before the council, simply to accept at face-value every interpretation of the Gospel and the moral law that pastoral authorities present to them.

It's not that Catholic laity have adopted a cavalier attitude toward the fundamental truths of faith, such as the divinity of Christ or the Lord's central commands to love and to forgive one another without limit. On the contrary, Catholic laity embrace these truths as the core of the Gospel.

What has changed is the Catholic

laity's skepticism toward official interpretations of teachings that are both farther removed from that core and also closer to the laity's own direct experience and moral competence. These would include, for example, certain teachings about marriage and human sexuality, and about the dignity and equality of women.

And yet the differences that have emerged on such issues have not affected the health and vitality of Catholic worship and ministry at the parish level. At least not for the moment.

The reason is that one of the most significant changes in the postconciliar period is the erosion of the normative status of parish boundary lines. In a word, post-Vatican II Catholics "shop" for parishes with good liturgies, good preaching, good ministries, and well-integrated, healthy priests.

When and if the day should come that these parochial alternatives were to disappear, then the media and everyone else can begin talking about an acutely real crisis in the Catholic Church.

That day will come if present trends regarding the quantity and quality of priests are not reversed. And it will take more than prayer, fasting, and hoping against hope to have that happen.

The 'end' can ready us for eternity

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 21:5-19. (R1) Malachi 3:19-20. (R2) 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12.

Next Sunday is the last before the Feast of Christ the King, which brings the liturgical year to a close. So it is fitting that Sunday's readings focus on the last things.

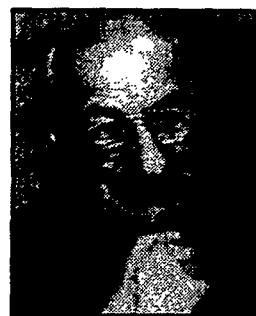
The prophet Malachi (450 B.C.) answers the questions: "Is God fair in his dealings with men? Does he really care that there are so many wrongs in the world?"

Malachi answers, "He most certainly is fair and he does care! For a day is coming when he will set all things right. The proud and evildoers will be burned like stubble in a blazing oven; whereas that same fire will heal all those who fear his name and not destroy them, just as the same sun hardens mud and melts snow."

The responsorial refrain echoes the same sentiments of Malachi: "The Lord comes to rule the earth with justice."

Man has only time, whereas God has eternity.

Thus Sirach wrote: "Like a drop of sea water, like a grain of sand, so are these few years among the days of eternity. That is why the Lord is patient with men and showers upon them his mercy"



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

(18:8-9). In other words, God tolerates evildoers, hoping to lead them back to sanity and draw good from evil.

The Gospel seems terribly complicated, but it is not if we treat it as a here-and-now judgment. Jesus was a bit downcast at the response to his Jerusalem ministry. The apostles tried to cheer him up by pointing out the grandeur of the Temple.

The first Temple, once the glory of the world, had been built by Solomon. The Babylonians destroyed that temple in 587 B.C. A second Temple was built on the spot about 520-515 B.C. Though not so glorious as Solomon's, the prophet Haggai said it would be greater than Solomon's Temple, because the Lord of the Temple would enter it one

day. The third Temple was actually a reconstruction and an enlargement of the second Temple, begun by King Herod the Great around 20-19 B.C. to ingratiate himself with the Jews.

The one Temple was the emblem of the one God; it was the very center of Israel's life and her pride and joy; it was inconceivable, unimaginable that it should ever be destroyed. Yet Jesus told them that it would be torn down and not one stone would be left on another.

The apostles asked, "When?" Jesus ignored the "when" and told them to prepare themselves for those times.

It can be a wholesome thought for us always to remember that all the things in the world will end.

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* offers an excellent illustration of how facing the end can cause a radical change in one's life. Pierre, the protagonist, feels deadened by the meaningless, empty life of the Russian aristocracy. A lost soul, he stumbles through the first 900 pages of the novel searching for some purpose in life.

The pivotal point of the book occurs when Pierre is captured by Napoleon's troops and sentenced to death before a firing squad. Sixth in line, he watches the execution of the five men in front of

himself. At the last moment, he is unexpectedly reprieved.

The experience, however, transforms Pierre, who then spends the remaining 300 pages of the novel living his life purposefully. He is able to give himself fully to others; he discovers meaning in life.

Being aware of the fragility of our lives, that they too will end, can also create in us an awareness that can produce new life in us.

Daily Readings

Monday, Nov. 20

1 Mc 1:10-15, 41-43, 54-57, 62-63; Lk 18:35-43

Tuesday, Nov. 21

2 Mc 6:18-31; Lk 19:1-10

Wednesday, Nov. 22

2 Mc 7:1, 20-31; Lk 19:11-28

Thursday, Nov. 23

Jl 2:21-24, 26-27; Mk 4:26-29

Friday, Nov. 24

1 Mc 4:36-37, 52-59; Lk 19:45-48

Saturday, Nov. 25

1 Mc 6:1-13; Lk 20:27-40

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