

COLUMNISTS

Assessing state of the Catholic Church

The feast of the Nativity annually inspires an abundance of poetry and prose on the mystery of the Incarnation, the humble circumstances of Christ's birth, the church's abiding concern for the poor and the homeless, and the need to save Christmas from the flood tide of commercialism.

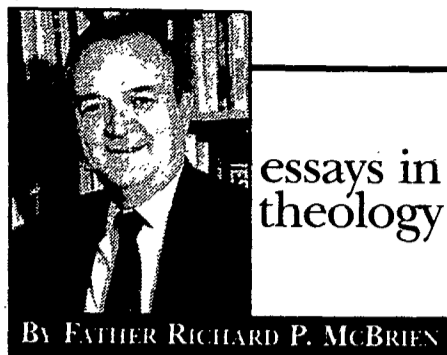
Over the past three decades, this column has contributed more than its fair share to this reservoir of pious, seasonal reflections. This week's essay, however, takes a different approach. It offers a report on the state of the Catholic Church at Christmas rather than a meditation on the feast of the Nativity itself.

Within the past several weeks, the church's hierarchy has suffered embarrassing setbacks in two of the world's most devoutly Catholic countries: Poland and Ireland.

In Poland President Lech Walesa was defeated for reelection by a former Communist, Aleksander Kwasniewski, following an election campaign in which Walesa had been actively supported by leading church officials.

Cardinal Jozef Glemp, primate of the church in Poland, had publicly described Mr. Kwasniewski as representing "neo-pagan" values. After casting his own ballot, the cardinal said that the vote presented a clear choice between "neo-pagan" and "Christian" values.

President Walesa's parish priest in Gdansk, who was reported to have given an anti-Semitic sermon in his presence



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

earlier in the year, called Walesa the only candidate who could be the guardian of "religious and national identity."

In the final days of the campaign, the church struck hard against Mr. Kwasniewski, charging that he would seek a revival of the old Communist regime and deploring the plank in his party's platform that called for a liberalization of Poland's strict abortion laws.

By doing so, suggested Marcin Krol, lay Catholic editor of the monthly magazine *Res Publica Nowa*, the church may have steered more votes away from Mr. Walesa than toward him.

"There was a big percentage of voters who voted for Kwasniewski because of the negative feelings they had about Walesa, and the church's approval of Walesa added to that," Krol said.

Opinion surveys taken after the fall of communism in Poland have indicated that many Poles believe the church has become too powerful and too intrusive

in their lives.

This growing resentment has been linked with the church's successful efforts to have religion taught in the public schools and to strengthen the nation's abortion laws. A recent survey disclosed that 70 percent of Poles favor liberalization of those laws.

The secretary general of the national episcopal conference in Poland, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, acknowledged that Mr. Kwasniewski's victory had been a setback for the church, although he also accused him of running an anticlericalist campaign.

The bishop conceded, however, that some conservative political parties that had taken part in the first round of the presidential elections and that had closely identified themselves with the interests of the church had antagonized many voters by their use of "aggressive language that was unacceptable to people."

On the basis of interviews with political analysts and church officials in Poland, the *New York Times* concluded that the outcome of the election represented "a considerable defeat for the powerful Roman Catholic Church" (11/21/95).

Only a few days later the church's hierarchy in Ireland suffered a similarly embarrassing electoral defeat. In a bitterly contested referendum, Irish voters, by a narrow margin of 50.3 percent to 49.7 percent, supported the legalization of divorce in the teeth of the Irish hier-

archy's strong and public opposition.

As in Poland, there were reports that many Irish voters (in a country where as much as 92 percent of the population are practicing Catholics) resented their bishops' involvement.

The credibility of the hierarchy had already been damaged by the recent nationwide scandals involving sexual misconduct by priests and by the bishops' initial tendency to deny and cover up the problem.

Meanwhile, in Germany and Austria 1.5 million and 500,000 church-going Catholics respectively signed petitions calling for major church reforms, including the end of obligatory celibacy for priests and the ordination of women.

Some have speculated that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's recent definitive statement against women's ordination may have been inspired in large part by the petition circulating in his own homeland.

For many Catholics, developments like these only confirm their conviction that the church must stiffen its spine and work even harder to get its message across. For others, however, this should be an occasion to pause and to ask why the credibility problem exists in the first place, and then to find ways to respond to it positively, not defensively or polemically.

The debate goes on, alas, even at Christmas.

Angels entrusted with special messages

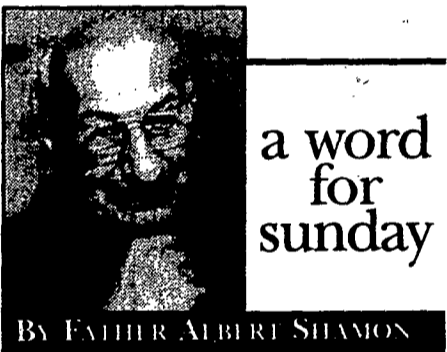
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 1:18-24; (R1) Isaiah 7:10-14; (R2) Romans 1:1-7.

In the Christmas story, angels play a major role. In Sunday's Gospel an angel comes to Joseph to tell him that the child that Mary carries within her is of the Holy Spirit.

Janice Connell in her book *Angel Power* writes that "Humanity stands at the brink of the Era of Angels." Angels are a real part of reality. Angels are not mythical beings, nor are they personifications of psychological or social forces or drives. Nor are they projections of the human unconscious mind, abstractions, belonging to primitive outmoded ways of thinking.

Angels are persons; they have their own personalities and characteristics. There are more angels than there are human beings. They outnumber us, some fathers of the church think, in commenting on the parable of the lost sheep, 99 to one. The lost sheep is the human race; the 99, the good angels. John in his Book of Revelation saw so many angels in heaven that he couldn't begin to count them!

Scholars throughout the ages have taught that there are nine choirs of angels. The highest class are the Angels of



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHANNON

Pure Contemplation: the Seraphim, who reflect the love of God; the Cherubim, who reflect the knowledge of God; and the Thrones, who reflect the majesty of God.

The middle class of angels are the Angels of the Universe: the Dominions, the Powers, and the Virtues. During the Middle Ages, people thought that the angels were big persons, big enough to grab hold of the stars and the planets, and to guide them around the heavens!

The lowest class of angels are the Angels of the Earth: Principalities, who rule kingdoms; the Archangels, who bring very important messages to earth - special deliveries; and the angels, whose job is to take care of each of us.

The one big thing we know about angels is that they are messengers from

God. An angel came to Hagar in Genesis 16, and told her how famous her son would be. Angels took Lot and his family from the city of Sodom, and saved their lives. An angel commissioned Gideon to raise a little army and save the Israelites from Midianite terrors. The list could go on: Gabriel to Zechariah and Mary; angels to Peter and Paul, and so on. In Hebrew and Greek, the word "angel" means "messenger." The terms are identical: An angel is a messenger; and a messenger is an angel.

Consider the word "evangelism." It means "Good News!" It means you've got something wonderful to tell. You are so full of the love of God that it spills out in your conversations. But what is in the middle of that word "evangelism"? It's the word "angel." Evangelism means "Good Message." In the Bible, "angel" and "messenger" mean the same thing! But angels don't show up every day. That is why the visitations by the angel in the Christmas story are so dramatic. Angels bring only big messages, messages marked special delivery.

And that was why an angel came to Joseph. This was a big message. That was why Gabriel showed up to Zechariah and Mary. He came with a special delivery: a message of Jesus, of salvation,

of hope in troubled times. It was a big message, a miraculous message!

And the interesting thing is that Joseph and Mary in turn become "angels" - messengers of good news: Joseph to Mary and Mary to Elizabeth.

Angels love us. Angels are most powerful. They will use their power in our behalf, if only we pray to them.

Daily Readings

Monday, Dec. 25

Night 14: Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14

Dawn 15: Is 62:11-12; Ti 3:4-7; Lk 2:15-20

Day 16: Is 52:7-10; Heb 1:1-6; Jn 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14

Tuesday, Dec. 26

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59; Mt 10:17-22

Wednesday, Dec. 27

1 Jn 1:1-4; Jn 20:2-8

Thursday, Dec. 28

1 Jn 1:5-2:2; Mt 2:13-18

Friday, Dec. 29

1 Jn 2:3-11; Lk 2:22-35

Saturday, Dec. 30

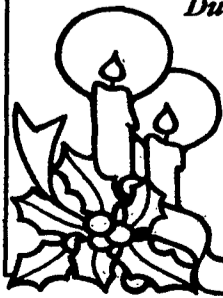
1 Jn 2:12-17; Lk 2:26-40

Create a New Ritual...

Light four candles in Honor and Celebration of your Loved one.

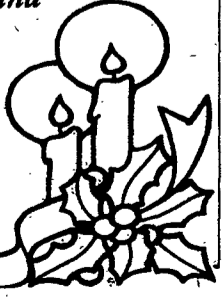
The four candles represent your Grief, your Courage, your Memories, and your Love.

During this time of New Hope, may you find Peace and Joy in Remembering.



Crawford
FUNERAL HOME INC.

495 North Winton Road
Rochester
(716) 482-0400



Happy Holidays!

from

TOWN GATE EAST

(716) 381-0282

2006 Five Mile Line Road
in Penfield