

COLUMNISTS

No going back to church's old ways

Two months ago I did a column on the liturgy, highlighting the ancient principle, "the law of praying is the law of believing." How we worship is the most tangible expression of how we understand ourselves as church.

The liturgical renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council is our window into the council's deeper renewal of ecclesiology, of the way we understand the nature, mission, and ministries of the church.

Catholics who never read any of the council documents nevertheless know what the council was all about. They know it experientially, through their weekly participation in the post-Vatican II liturgy.

That is also why Catholics who are unhappy with the conciliar renewal focus their ire on the liturgy, and why most letters of complaint they write — to the local bishop or to the Vatican — are about supposed excesses in liturgical practice.

What bothers them more than the particular changes they encounter in the liturgy are the deeper ecclesiological changes which these liturgical changes reflect.

Catholics over the age of 45 or 50 can recall the old Latin Mass. It was a complex rite celebrated by the priest alone,



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

with his back to the congregation and in a voice barely audible to it. Even if the people could hear him, they needed a missal to translate the Latin he spoke.

That way of celebrating Mass aptly expressed the ecclesiology operative at the time. The church was a clerical preserve in which all the really important things were done by priests, with the laity playing an almost entirely passive role — in the case of the Mass, not even giving the simple responses, like "Amen."

Even the language we used in those days betrayed us. We "attended" Mass, or we "heard" Mass.

Some of that language (and the theological mentality it reflects) is still with us in media reports of Catholic events.

Thus, the pope was said to have "delivered" or "performed" a Mass in Cen-

tral Park, New York City, last October. The "congregation" is thereby reduced to spectators at a kind of rock concert.

The point here is that the council promoted renewal as the logical and necessary follow-up to its renewal of ecclesiology. It could not have done otherwise.

How, for example, could the council have spoken of the whole church as the "people of God," and then have allowed the church's central act of worship to remain a clerical rite, in an unintelligible language, with little or no meaningful role for the rest of the faithful?

And yet there are some Catholics today who want to reverse all this, who want to go back to the way the liturgy was celebrated in the 1950s. What they really want, however, is a return to the way the church was perceived and functioned in the 1950s — with the pope absolutely in charge of everybody and everything, with the bishops loyally carrying out his every wish and command, with priests and religious obediently carrying out the orders of the pope, their bishops, and their local superiors, and with the laity doing essentially what they are told to do by those above them on the ecclesiastical ladder.

Loyal bishops became archbishops

and cardinals. Loyal priests became bishops and monsignors. Loyal religious became religious superiors. Loyal — and generous — laity received papal awards (knights or that) or had their names chiseled on a plaque or a building. It was as if this were somehow the divinely-ordered structure of reality.

In a recent talk in Los Angeles, Bishop Donald Trautman of Erie, Pa., and chairman of the U. S. bishops' Committee on Liturgy, put the issue as directly as one can. "Let us have the courage to tell it the way it is," he said. "A pre-Vatican II liturgical theology has no chance of speaking to a post-Vatican II world."

And the reason this is so is that a pre-Vatican II ecclesiology also has no chance of speaking to a post-Vatican II world. We cannot go back to a clericalized liturgy because we cannot go back to a clericalized church.

We cannot go back to a male-dominated liturgy structured totally along hierarchical lines because we cannot go back to a church structured totally along hierarchical lines, with a male-dominated, military-style chain of command.

We've changed our way of worship because we've changed our self-understanding as a worshipping community.

And there's no going back.

God gives us choices; choose wisely

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 5:17-37. (R1) Sirach 15:15-20. (R2) 1 Corinthians 2:6-10.

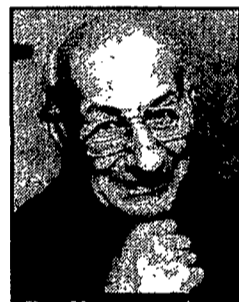
Comedian Flip Wilson used to excuse his antics by saying, "The devil made me do it!" Of course that was a joke. No body can make us do anything we do not want to do. Sirach in the first reading uses the word "choose" three times to underscore the fact that we are free.

Choice implies freedom. Freedom is the one gift that God has given us that is wholly ours. God will never violate our freedom. Hence his Gospel is an invitation.

There are three things we ought to know about this power of ours to choose.

First, we *must* choose. You cannot drive a car in neutral. To move ahead one must shift to drive. Likewise to live one must choose.

Secondly, there are only two choices open to us in this world: life or death. "Before man are life and death; whichever ever he chooses shall be given him." There is no middle road. There is only God or Satan, heaven or hell, life or death. "No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the oth-



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

er ... You cannot serve God and mammon."

Thirdly, since we are free we are responsible for our actions. Life is like a game of checkers. As your moves determine the outcome of the games so your choices determine the outcome of your life. We can choose fire or water — that which destroys or that which nourishes.

We can choose life or death — that which makes life worth living or that which makes a life worth living. We can go to heaven or to hell. It depends on our choices.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to think we can choose the wrong things and still be a right person. We become what we choose.

In the Gospel Jesus tells us how we can choose life, namely, by keeping the commandments. "If you keep you can keep the commandments."

Jesus mentions four, forbidding murder, adultery, and divorce, and bearing false witness or lying. Regarding these commandments, Jesus does two things.

First, he shows he is God. To the Jews, the Law was from God. It was divine. Yet five times Jesus dared to correct the inadequacies of the Law. "You have heard that it was said (by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai) ... But I say to you ..." Not even the prophets dared to tamper with the Law. Yet Jesus did, claiming implicitly he was greater than any prophet.

The members in orchestras that played under Toscanini said that the moment he mounted the rostrum, you could feel the authority flowing from him. So it was with Jesus. Authority flowed from him. The people felt it.

"The crowds," wrote St. Matthew, "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt 7:28).

Secondly, Jesus pointed out that the heart of the Law is the heart! Commandments are laws. Laws exist to help people live together in harmony. So laws

touch only external actions. A person can keep all the laws of society and still be a most evil person.

The world judges a person by what he does: God judges a person by what he is, thinks, feels, loves. As a jeweler judges the worth of a watch by its inner workings, so God judges our worth by the inner movements of our minds and hearts.

Jesus counseled us not so much about murder as about the inward hate, anger, malice, that leads to murder. Jesus laid the ax at the root — at the heart.

"Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

Daily Readings

Monday, Feb. 12

Jas 1:1-11; Mk 8:11-13

Tuesday, Feb. 13

Jas 1:12-18; Mk 8:14-21

Wednesday, Feb. 14

Jas 1:19-27; Mk 8:22-26

Thursday, Feb. 15

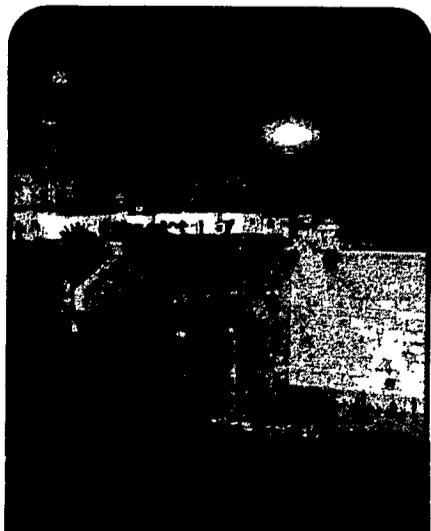
Jas 2:1-9; Mk 8:27-33

Friday, Feb. 16

Jas 2:14-24, 26; Mk 8:34-9:1

Saturday, Feb. 17

Jas 3:1-10; Mk 9:2-13



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