

# COLUMNISTS

## Baptism recognizes shared mission

Throughout the history of the church the pastoral fortunes of the sacraments of baptism and holy orders have been linked closely together.

When baptism was seen, as in the earlier centuries of the church and again today, as the beginning of the process of initiation into the Body of Christ and as a burial with Christ and a rising with him to new life through conversion, the forgiveness of sins, and the reception of the Holy Spirit, the important role of the laity in the life of the church was generally recognized and honored.

Thus understood, baptism required a careful and relatively protracted period of preparation, known as the catechumenate. The Second Vatican Council acknowledged this need in its restoration of the catechumenate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

By contrast, in those centuries when baptism was seen primarily, if not exclusively, as a means of eradicating original sin, the sacrament assumed the character of a once-and-for-all event.

Once administered, baptism could be forgotten — almost like a vaccination. For most Catholics, a certificate attesting to its reception was required only at the time of confirmation and marriage.

Such a limited view of baptism before Vatican II made any serious preparation for it seem unnecessary. The common pastoral practice was that the father and the two godparents simply brought the newborn baby to church on a Sunday af-



essays in  
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ternoon, without an appointment, answered a few questions by the priest, and had the child baptized. The mother remained at home.

Any meaningful connection between baptism and the mission and ministries of the church was all but lost. The laity were simply recipients of the spiritual benefits made available to them by the clergy, especially through the rest of the sacraments which baptism rendered the laity eligible to receive.

The sacrament of holy orders has had an inverse historical development in relation to baptism. When baptism was seen in its proper pastoral and theological perspective, the priesthood was viewed as an important, but not the only important, ministry exercised by, and on behalf of, the whole community of the baptized.

Thus, in the New Testament only Jesus is called "priest" and the church a

"priestly people." On the other hand, the references to baptism are clear and relatively frequent.

As the rite of baptism deteriorated after the fourth century, the title of catechumen lost its significance. Many delayed baptism until the end of their lives, since it could be received only once and it forgave all sins. (Penance was also received only once in a lifetime.)

By the Middle Ages the catechumenate for all practical purposes no longer existed. Some of its ancient elements (anointings, profession of faith, renunciation of Satan) were assimilated into the one baptismal rite.

The virtual suppression of the catechumenate led to the pre-Vatican II pastoral situation described above, when Catholics simply "showed up" at church to have their babies baptized.

As a sense of the ecclesial and missionary importance of baptism decreased, the importance of the ordained priesthood increased.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the clergy became equivalent to civil servants, situated above the ordinary populace. It was because of this and other factors that the catechumenate began to decline.

By the Middle Ages, the belief had become widespread that the priesthood was a step on the divinely constructed hierarchical ladder, located somewhere between bishops and the laity.

It was in reaction to some of these developments that the Reformers rejected the hard-and-fast distinction between clergy and laity and proclaimed a priesthood of all believers. And it was in reaction to the Reformers that the Council of Trent reaffirmed, in turn, the ordained priesthood over against the notion of a priesthood of all believers.

But perhaps nothing shaped the pre-Vatican II understanding of the priesthood so much as the 17th-century French school of spirituality which placed the ordained priest on higher and higher spiritual pedestals, approaching even the realm of the divine.

The priesthood was no longer defined primarily in terms of ministry, but in terms of its spiritual powers, and particularly its power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ at Mass.

Vatican II, however, restored the sacrament of baptism to its rightful place of prominence. By baptism, all of us are called to share in the mission and ministries of the church, of which the ministry of the ordained priest is only one, albeit a very important one.

What we have witnessed since the council, therefore, is not a diminishing of the ordained priesthood but a restoration of the fundamental importance of baptism and of the missionary responsibility that belongs to all of the baptized, nonordained and ordained alike.

## Holiness begins in the heart

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 5:38-48. (R1) Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18. (R2) 1 Corinthians 3:16-23.

The Book of Leviticus deals with the laws regarding the worship of God, entrusted to the tribe of Levi. Hence the name of the book. One truth that this book drives home is the holiness of God. The Levites are told over and over again to do something, "Because I, the Lord, am holy."

God said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.'"

What is holiness? Oh, people have all kinds of notions of what holiness is. But the true notion of holiness is quite simple. When Dr. Dozous knelt next to Bernadette at Lourdes, and Bernadette told him that Our Lady was asking that we pray for sinners, Dr. Dozous asked Bernadette, "What are sinners?" Without a moment's hesitation, Bernadette answered, "A sinner is one who loves evil." Later on, Dr. Dozous explained to the authorities the soundness of Bernadette's mind. He commented that Bernadette did not say that a sinner is one who does evil, but one who loves evil!

Holiness begins in the heart: It is love



a word  
for  
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

of God and love of neighbor. But that love is holy when it has the added note of steadfastness. Holiness is a love that never fluctuates. The very word sanctity comes from the Latin *sancio* meaning "to fix unalterably."

We differ from the saints precisely on this point. Saints have their hearts set on God irrevocably. Like the needle of a compass which always points in the same direction, no matter where it is placed, so no matter the circumstances or situation in which a saint may find him or herself, their will points always the same way: to the will of God. We, on the contrary, are like weather vanes: Towards wayward and weak; we change with the changing sky; one day eager

and brave, the next not caring to try. Like yo-yos we're up and down.

So that's the first point about holiness: It's a steadfast love of God's will. But there is a second point to holiness: Love has to express itself. "Love is not idle," said St. Gregory. "Where it exists, it does great things." Holiness is faith gone to work: loving others for the love of God.

Here is how God put it in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall not bear hatred for your brother ... take no revenge ... cherish no grudge ... love your neighbor as yourself." That last command is a good yardstick for living: What you want for yourself, want for others; what you do not want done to you, do not do to others.

Jesus went even further. He said that if someone injures you, turn the other cheek.

Jesus's cardinal rule is "Retaliate with love." Love conquers everything.

Father Faber wrote:

*It was but a sunny smile,  
And little it cost in the giving,  
But it scattered the night like  
the morning light  
And made the day worth living.  
It was but a kindly word,*

*A word that was lightly spoken,  
Yet not in vain for it chilled the pain  
Of a heart that was nearly broken.  
It was but a helping hand,  
And it seemed of little availing,  
But its clasp was warm, it saved from  
harm*

*A brother whose strength was failing,  
The sunny smile, the kindly word, the  
helping hand will not only lighten the  
load of others, but will make you holy as  
God is holy.*

### Daily Readings

**Monday, Feb. 19**

Jas 3:13-18; Mk 9:14-29

**Tuesday, Feb. 20**

Jas 4:1-10; Mk 9:30-37

**Wednesday, Feb. 21**

Jl 2:12-18; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2;

Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

**Thursday, Feb. 22**

1 Pt 5:1-4; Mt 16:13-19

**Friday, Feb. 23**

Is 58:1-9; Mt 9:14-15

**Saturday, Feb. 24**

Is 58:9-14; Lk 5:27-32

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