

COLUMNISTS

Canon law better reflects rights of laity

One of the major characteristics of Catholicism today is its emphasis on the active role of the laity in the mission and ministries of the church. It has not always been so.

Before Vatican II there was a well-worn, cynical expression that the functions of the laity were "to pray, pay, and obey." There were, of course, extraordinary initiatives taken during this period by individual lay people and lay organizations (one thinks, for example, of Dorothy Day and of the St. Vincent de Paul Society), but for the most part the laity were recipients of the church's sacramental and catechetical ministrations, not active participants in them.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the manner in which the Mass was celebrated: in Latin, with the priest's back to the people, and with the congregation's vocal parts taken over by altar boys and choirs.

Today, however, laity serve as pastoral associates in parishes, as directors of religious education and youth ministry, as coordinators of liturgy, as ministers of the Eucharist, as lectors, and so on.

And that is the way it should be, given the fact that the church is the whole community of the baptized, not just the hierarchy, the clergy, and the religiously



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

professed.

Did we ever deny that? Not in so many words, but that was too often the implication of much of our teaching, preaching, and pastoral practice.

Indeed, so authoritative a commentator as the late Cardinal Yves Congar, one of the greatest theologians of the century, had once pointed out that, nine times out of 10, when Catholics used the word "church," they meant the hierarchy. Ecclesiology (the study of the church) had become hierarchology.

Most priests of my generation and older may recall that there wasn't much difference between their seminary courses in ecclesiology and canon law. Both were a kind of ecclesiastical political science, with their central focus on the church's governing structures and pastoral offices

— and the spiritual and juridical powers attached thereto.

But today even canon law has changed for the better. In the old code, the only right the laity were said to possess was the right to receive from the clergy spiritual goods and aids necessary for their salvation (Canon 682). For the most part, the laity were defined negatively. They were neither clergy nor religious.

There was even a canon (683) that explicitly prohibited lay persons from wearing clerical attire. How times have changed. Today church officials wonder how they can get the clergy to wear clerical attire!

The revised Code of 1983 contains many new and important canons on the laity, including a series that resembles a bill of rights, among which are the church employees' "right to a decent remuneration suited to their condition so that they should be able to provide decently for their own needs and for those of their family with due regard for the prescriptions of civil law; and...a right that their pension, social security and health benefits be duly provided" (Canon 231.2).

That canon simply applies the church's own social justice teaching to the internal life of the church itself.

But hasn't this renewed emphasis on the role and rights of the laity had the effect of diminishing the ministerial stature of the clergy? Hasn't it confused and demoralized some clergy who were ordained for one kind of ministry only to find themselves in later years required to exercise a different, collaborative type of ministry? And hasn't this also contributed to a decline in vocations to the priesthood? The only sensible answer to such questions is, "Perhaps." We just don't know for sure. We do know, however, that there aren't any theological or pastoral reasons why a renewed emphasis on lay ministry should adversely affect the exercise or the stature of the ordained ministry of the priest. The two are not in competition with one another.

The council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" made this clear: "Pastors also know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church ... they understand that it is their noble duty so to shepherd the faithful and recognize their services and charismatic gifts that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart" (n. 30).

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Some things are 'too important not to share'

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 4:5-42. (R1) Exodus 17:3-7. (R2) Romans 5:1-2, 5-8.

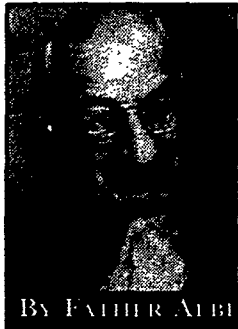
In his book of answers to current questions, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II is asked, "What is the New Evangelization?"

The Holy Father answers that it is first of all, a proclamation of the Gospel — the greatest need of the world as it approaches the year 2000. Secondly, it is a struggle against powerful anti-Christian forces opposing the Gospel and evangelization: science, culture, the media, and the intellectual elite. In a word, it is the church's struggle for the world's soul.

A Mercedes-Benz TV commercial shows one of their cars colliding with a concrete wall during a safety test. Almost every other car maker in the world has copied the Mercedes' design in spite of the fact that they have an exclusive patent. The engineer is asked why his company does not enforce its patent.

The engineer replies in clipped German accent, "Because in life, some things are just too important not to share."

Wow! What a great statement. Some things are just too important not to share. Of nothing is this more true than the Gospel. Christ is too important not to be shared. "Woe to me," said St. Paul, "if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16).



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Preaching the Gospel is evangelism. In Sunday's Gospel we meet an evangelist.

First of all, she is a woman. In the Gospel, women have a hallowed place. They loved Christ, ministered to him, stood by him when all others had abandoned him.

However, there is something surprising about the woman evangelist in the Gospel: She wasn't a very nice woman. She had been married five times. Her present spouse was not her husband.

Back in 1958 Ed Sullivan invited Ingrid Bergman to appear on his program. Ingrid at that time was living with an Italian film producer, not her husband. She had mothered a child by him. When Sullivan announced she would appear on his show, such a public clamor arose that Sullivan had to rescind his invitation.

In Jesus' time an adulteress could be

stoned. Yet Jesus spoke to one. She was a village outcast; that was why she came to draw water at midday when the other women of the village were not around. Yet Jesus spoke to her.

She was shocked: Jews never spoke to Samaritans. Moreover, he called her "woman." The Greek word he used was "gune" — a term of endearment. It was the same word he used for his mother, Mary, at the wedding feast at Cana.

The impact on her was enormous. Never before had a man shown her such respect. She wanted love so much. She went from one dead-end relationship to another. Yet no man ever gave her what she sought. Then she encountered Jesus. She discovered he was what she really needed all these years. He showed her that her life mattered, that she mattered. She was ecstatic. First, she had called him Jew, then sir, then prophet, then Messiah!

When the disciples returned, she left. St. John wrote, "She left her water jar."

Why? Because she was in a hurry? More likely, because she would have an excuse to come back.

But what is so striking is that this woman, who had fouled up her life in so many ways, became an evangelist. "Come," she said to the people, "see a man who has told me everything I have

done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?"

A good number to the villagers went out to the well. "Many believed in him because of the word of the woman."

There you have it: an unlikely evangelist. A woman, a Samaritan woman, a woman with a bad reputation. Yet Jesus found her and she found Jesus and she told everybody she met about him.

Like her, we too have to find Christ in our lives. When we do, we must tell others. For, after all, there are some things in life too important not to share.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, Mar. 11
2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30

Tuesday, Mar. 12
Daniel 3:25, 34-43;
Matthew 18:21-35

Wednesday, Mar. 13
Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9;
Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday, Mar. 14
Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23

Friday, Mar. 15
Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28-34

Saturday, Mar. 16
Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

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