

COLUMNISTS

Do these 'sins' merit excommunication?

Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., was in the news a few weeks ago because of his formal canonical warning, published in his diocesan newspaper, that Catholics in his diocese who belong to any of a number of designated organizations or groups after April 15 will be, by that very fact, under interdict (i.e., forbidden to perform any ministerial acts in connection with the Eucharist) and will be excluded from the reception of Holy Communion.

If, after one month, they remain in those organizations or groups, they are automatically excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Absolution from the penalties of interdict and excommunication is reserved to the bishop.

The designated groups include: Planned Parenthood, Society of Saint Pius X (the followers of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who are already outside the church), the Hemlock Society, Call to Action (a third of whose membership consists of priests and nuns), Call to Action Nebraska (the organization whose recent founding seems to have precipitated the bishop's action), Saint Michael the Archangel Chapel (presumably a group of Catholics using the Tridentine Mass according to the old Latin rite), Freemasons, Job's Daughters, DeMolay, Eastern Star, Rainbow Girls, and Catholics for a Free Choice.

It doesn't require much intelligence to



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

see that the real targets are Planned Parenthood, Call to Action, and Catholics for a Free Choice. The rest serve as camouflage. One wonders how the Rainbow Girls, for example, constitute a "perilous" threat to the Catholic Church.

One also wonders why the bishop took such a modest step. Did he deliberately ignore far bigger targets, with far larger memberships? The Republican Party's programs, policies, and platforms regarding the poor, children, immigration, and capital punishment — just for starters — are at least in some measure inconsistent with the social teachings of the Catholic Church, as articulated by the popes (including the current pope) and as interpreted and reaffirmed by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, is committed to a pro-choice approach to the issue of abortion. Enough said. Why aren't Catholic members of

the Democratic Party placed under interdict and threatened with the same penalty of excommunication for belonging to a pro-choice organization with far more clout and with far greater capacity for moral mischief than Catholics for a Free Choice?

Canon lawyers tended to inform reporters that the bishop was perfectly within his ecclesiastical rights to do what he did. Perhaps he was imprudent, they would say off the record, but they couldn't deny that he acted in accordance with his canonical authority.

Others, less attuned to the canonical nuances, were more inclined to see it in practical, pastoral terms. For them, the bishop's action was simply inexplicable, potentially disruptive of the good order of the church, and harmful in any case to its reputation.

As I write these lines, at least a few bishops have already made it clear to their own local media that they have no plans to follow Bishop Bruskewitz's lead. What they were not saying to reporters is what they have been saying among themselves — for example, at a recent ordination of a new bishop on the East Coast. Even conservative bishops agreed that it was a — well, ill-advised move that makes their own work more difficult.

Excommunication, after all, is the most serious penalty the church can impose on any of its members. It is analo-

gous to capital punishment, except that, unlike the executed criminal who can't come back to life, the excommunicated person can always be restored to the good graces of the church through repentance and absolution.

When one realizes the kinds of sins for which the Code of Canon Law imposes the automatic penalty of excommunication, the "sins" of our brother and sister Catholics in Nebraska seem to pale into insignificance.

Automatic excommunication is imposed on apostates (those who renounce the faith entirely), heretics (those who deny one or more articles of faith), schismatics (such as the members of the Society of Saint Pius X who, as noted above, are already out), priests who absolve their accomplices of sins against the sixth commandment, priests who break the seal of the confessional, those who lay violent hands upon the pope, those who desecrate the Eucharist, those who procure an abortion, and bishops who ordain another bishop without permission from Rome (which is how Archbishop Lefebvre himself incurred the penalty).

There seems to be some considerable spiritual distance between such offenses as these and membership in the Rainbow Girls.

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

Faith and love breed hope

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 24:13-35; (R1) Acts 2:14, 22-28; (R2) 1 Peter 1:17-21.

"I've got some good news and some bad news to tell you. Which would you like to hear first?" a farmer asked.

"Why don't you tell me the bad news first?" the banker replied.

"OK," said the farmer, "With the bad drought and inflation and all, I won't be able to pay anything on my mortgage this year, either on the principal or the interest."

"Well, that is pretty bad," said the banker.

"It gets worse," said the farmer. "I also won't be able to pay anything on the loan for all that machinery I bought, not on the principal or interest."

"Wow, that is bad!" the banker admitted.

"It's worse than that," the farmer continued. "You remember I also borrowed to buy seed, fertilizer, and other supplies. Well, I can't pay anything on that either — principal or interest."

"That's awful," said the banker, "and that's enough! What's the good news?"

"The good news," the farmer replied with a smile, "is that I intend to keep on doing business with you."

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Two disciples were on the road to Emmaus. They were as low as that farmer,



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

if not lower. Puzzling things were going on that they did not understand. Their Master had been crucified like a common thief. They, in turn, had scattered like frightened sheep.

But now there were reports that their Master was not dead at all. Reliable sources told them that he had appeared to some of their most trusted friends. Was this true? Was he really alive? The disciples were troubled and afraid. Should they believe the good news or the bad?

That's our dilemma, too. Do we believe the good news or the bad? The good news is that Christ is alive. The bad news is that this event is having so little impact in the world today.

In the midst of our great affluence, in the midst of our impressive military power and technological prowess, we are at heart a sick society. Some news-

casters predict it is going to get worse, that we will become a less caring, more violent society.

The contrast is startling. On one hand is the good news of Christ risen. On the other is the bad news of the world. It is easy to become fearful and troubled of heart just like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

As they journeyed, they were trying to make sense of their world. Then Jesus came to them. Jesus didn't wait for them to find him. He came to them. We don't have to pound on heaven's door to get God's attention. He knocks gently on the door of our hearts. We are the ones with an attention problem. Christ continually comes to us, but like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we do not recognize him.

When the disciples arrived at Emmaus, they were so enraptured with their new friend that they begged him to stay with them. He did. Then something beautiful happened. During the meal, Christ broke bread. The disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized him in the breaking of the bread. Then he vanished, as if to teach us that after Easter, his presence would be an invisible one, a sacramental one. Now here is what we cannot miss: Christ reveals himself to us through the hearing of the word and the breaking of the bread.

So what do you do when the world assaults you with bad news? What do you do when you feel all alone and lose contact with Christ? How do you experience his presence and encouragement once more? The answer is in the Mass. Go to Mass not only on Sundays but also on weekdays. The Liturgy of the Word will build up your faith, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist will fill your life with love. Faith and love will breed hope.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, April 22

Acts 6:8-15; John 6:22-29

Tuesday, April 23

Acts 7:51-8:1; John 6:30-35

Wednesday, April 24

Acts 8:1-8; John 6:35-40

Thursday, April 25

1 Peter 5:5-14; Mark 16:15-20

Friday, April 26

Acts 9:1-20; John 6:52-59

Saturday, April 27

Acts 9:31-42; John 6:60-69

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