

# COLUMNISTS

## The 'Spouse of Christ' prefers mercy

According to Catholic belief, the church is the Body of Christ, the People of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit — and more. The late Pope Paul VI reminded us at the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council in 1963 that the church is a mystery, that is, "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God."

The church exists to continue the work of Christ, that the Reign of God might come.

First, it proclaims the good news of God's all-embracing love for us and of the promise of eternal life. It does this in its preaching, its formal teaching, its catechesis and its theologies.

Second, the church continues Christ's worship of God in the Eucharist, the other sacraments, the Liturgy of the Hours, and in its whole life of prayer and devotion. The church is totally oriented to glorifying and praising God, to giving thanks for all that God has done and continues to do redemptively on our behalf, and to interceding with God, through Jesus Christ, for our needs and the needs of others.

Third, the church employs its own limited resources — material and moral — to help close the gap between God's promised reign of justice and peace and the sinful human situation we've somehow managed to create apart from God. The church, like Jesus, exists to serve, not to be served.

It recognizes that "action on behalf of



essays in  
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

justice and participation in the transformation of the world" are "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" ("Justice in the World," 1971 World Synod of Bishops, para. 6).

And, fourth, the church is called to be a sign, as well as an instrument, of God's redemptive presence and activity. It is the universal sacrament of salvation. As such, it must always practice what it preaches.

"While the Church is bound to give witness to justice," the synodal document declared, "it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes" (chapter 3, para. 2).

Given the nature and purpose of the church, it is not surprising that 99 percent of the church's daily life is focused on the celebration of the Eucharist and

the sacraments, on prayer and devotion, on preaching and teaching, and on ministering to the sick, the elderly, the troubled, the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized.

Inevitably, conflicts and various other problems arise in the course of the church's life. It was the case even in the earliest period described in the New Testament, and it has always been so throughout every century of the church's history.

When those conflicts and problems bubble to the surface of public attention, they often create an enormous distraction from the real work and purpose of the church. They drain church members' energies, and they divert their efforts from the church's real priorities.

Such was the case when, in the relatively small diocese of Lincoln, Neb., the local bishop decided to issue a canonical warning, threatening with excommunication any and all Catholics in his diocese who persisted in their membership in a variety of groups and organizations, from Planned Parenthood to the Rainbow Girls, from Call to Action to Job's Daughters, from Catholics for a Free Choice to the Freemasons.

The national media, of course, found the story thoroughly engaging. Network television, the major newspapers, talk radio — all seized upon it. Phone lines were alive with interviews.

Catholics reacted to the event in different ways, of course. More conserva-

tive members were supportive of the bishop's action. More liberal members were critical. The vast majority, somewhere in the middle, were either confused or embarrassed, or both.

Whatever the bishop's motivation, it seemed to many that the cure was far worse than the sickness, if such existed. Indeed, it was the extreme nature of excommunication — the most severe penalty the Catholic Church can ever impose — that turned this into a national story.

The Second Vatican Council and the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law laid down a more measured approach to penalties than the approach of earlier times. The council and the Code followed the lead of Pope John XXIII, who told the opening session of the council: "Nowadays, the Spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than of severity. She considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations."

When that good pastoral rule of thumb is broken, it opens the door to unnecessary conflict and confusion. The Church becomes distracted from its real work and purpose. And the general public is left wondering what we're really all about.

No one wins.

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

## CATHOLIC COURIER CLASSIFIEDS

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