

COLUMNISTS

Catholics value sacramental riches

I begin this week a summer series of columns on the sacraments. No topic is closer to the heart of the Catholic tradition, because Catholicism is defined by its sacramental vision and practice.

It is a vision that "sees" God in all things: in the whole created order, in the cosmos, in nature, in history, in objects, in rituals, in words, in every sentient creature, and in human beings fashioned in the divine image and likeness.

For the Catholic, all creation is good, even if fallen, because it comes from the hand of God and is suffused even now with the presence of God, because it has been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ, because it has been renewed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and because it is destined for eternal glory in the final reign, or kingdom, of God.

The seven sacraments are simply ritualized expressions of this larger sacramental universe. They are signs of God's saving presence and activity on our behalf, and they are the means by which God enters into communion with us and by which we render glory and thanksgiving to God.

It is the humanity of Christ that makes possible this whole sacred exchange, or communion, between God and ourselves. It is because he is human as well as divine that he is our Mediator with God. It is his humanity that bridges the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

otherwise unbridgeable gap between us.

That is why, contrary to popular belief, the church regards the denial of the humanity of Jesus Christ to be just as serious a heresy as the denial of his divinity.

Unfortunately, Catholicism's essentially sacramental character isn't always evident in the public image that the Catholic Church presents to the world at large, to the media, to the wider religious community, and even to its own membership.

To judge only by what often dominates discussions of the church in the public forum, Catholicism is a religion that is defined instead by its strict code of sexual morality and by its hierarchical form of government.

Indeed, for its severest critics, the Catholic Church is too much preoccupied with sex and power and not enough with the teaching and example of Jesus

himself about love, mercy, compassion, justice, repentance, forgiveness, healing, and hope.

Some Catholics have been quick to blame the media for this unfortunate perception, but the media are only partly responsible.

Church leaders, after all, have excommunicated or otherwise censured members of Catholic organizations simply because they favor continued discussion of the ordination of women (a gender-related subject) or the democratic election of bishops (an authority-related subject), but are such penalties ever contemplated for those who question or reject outright the social teachings of the church on the right of workers to unionize, on immigration, on governmental responsibility to the poor, or on racial discrimination?

When censures are imposed on theologians, the issues almost always have to do with sexual morality or the exercise of authority in the church.

And when the pope makes news for his more important encyclicals and public statements, the issues, again, frequently concern matters of sexual morality or gender: abortion, contraception, ordination of women. (Which is not to deny his many prophetic pronouncements on social justice and human rights.)

The most pedantic letters to editors always make the points that Jesus did not

establish his church as a democracy, that he bestowed on the pope ultimate and, therefore, unrestricted earthly authority to define the faith and impose discipline, and that the pope is simply faithfully enforcing the eternal, unchanging laws of God regarding such matters as birth control, homosexuality, abortion, and women priests.

But how many Catholics, in fact, remain active members of the church because of their admiration for its strict code of sexual morality or the stern operation of its hierarchical structure?

Catholics remain in the church primarily because of its rich sacramental life: its weekly celebration of the Eucharist in thanksgiving for all that God has done for us in Christ, its communication of new life in baptism, its gift of the Spirit of renewal and reconciliation in confirmation, its forgiveness of sin in the sacrament of penance, or reconciliation, its healing of infirmities in the anointing of the sick, its preparation for death in Viaticum, its final and hope-filled celebration of one's earthly life in the funeral liturgy, its blessing of unions born of love in marriage, and its ratification of the call to service in holy orders.

This is what Catholicism is essentially all about, even if its public image does not always match the reality.

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

Plant good seeds; the fruit will come

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 13:1-23. (R1) Isaiah 55:10-11. (R2) Romans 8:18-23.

One night a woman dreamed that she walked into a brand new shop. Much to her surprise, she found God working behind the counter. She asked God, "What do you sell here?"

"Everything your heart desires," God replied.

She was stunned. Here she was talking to God himself, and he told her she could have anything her heart desired.

"I want peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom from fear and worry," she told God. Then almost as an afterthought she added, "not just for me, but for everyone else on earth."

God smiled, "I think you've got me wrong, my dear. We don't sell fruits here. Only seeds."

The Gospel this Sunday is the parable of the sower and the seed. Our Lord had been preaching, teaching, doing great deeds for more than a year. And what was the result? Anything but success. The crowds following him were dwindling. The religious leaders were seeking to kill him. Even the Apostles were getting depressed and discouraged.

So our Lord pointed out to a farmer sowing seed. "See that farmer," he said. "Some of the seed is going to be lost. It's



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

natural. There is hard soil, rocky soil, and thorns — the seed falling in those places will be lost. And yet does the farmer stop sowing? No. Why? Because he knows that most of the seed will be fruitful; will bring forth an abundant harvest, despite the loss of some of the seed.

"Therefore," Jesus concluded, "never get discouraged. Just sow the seed; keep on working as I do. As the rain from heaven makes the earth fertile and productive, so shall it be with your endeavors for God."

Mother Teresa never started out on her religious life to help the poor. For more than 20 years she taught the wealthiest children in Calcutta, India. One night she was walking home and heard a woman crying out for help. Realizing the serious condition of the woman, she took her to a hospital. There, they were told to sit and

wait. She knew the woman would die without help. So she took her to another hospital. Again medical treatment was denied, the woman belonged to the wrong social caste. In desperation, Mother Teresa took the woman to her convent. Later that night, the woman died in the comfort of Mother Teresa's loving arms.

That night Mother Teresa resolved that this would never happen again to anyone within her reach. So, she left her career of teaching wealthy children and devoted her life to easing the pain of those who suffered around her. Whether they lived or died, they would do so with dignity. She would see to that.

Mother Teresa sowed a seed. Do you think she ever dreamed that this seed would produce a worldwide harvest, that lives all over the world would be touched by her sisters? Seed sown on good ground will produce a vast harvest.

The important thing is to sow the seed. The seed is the word of God. In the words of Isaiah, "It shall not return to me void ..." No matter how many resist it, there will be a harvest, an "achieving the end for which the word was sent."

Therefore, persevere in sowing the seed of the word of God: parents in the home, especially the seed of vocation in the young; laymen in the sphere of their work; priests in preaching and writing; politi-

cians in the field of government. Don't ever let discouragement or the dancing feet of pleasure, the thorns of riches, the envy of the devil harden the heart or render the seed sterile.

Never give up is what our Lord said in the parable. Never give up on your children, on your family, on society, on the church. Sow the seeds of goodness and after many days, these will produce a harvest a hundred-, sixty- and thirtyfold.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 15
Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 10:34-11:1

Tuesday, July 16
Isaiah 7:1-9; Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday, July 17
Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16;
Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday, July 18
Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19;
Matthew 11:28-30

Friday, July 19
Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8;
Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday, July 20
Micah 2:1-5; Matthew 12:14-21

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A WILL, THERE'S ONE
MORE THING TO DO..."**

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Kids' Answer: from page 12
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

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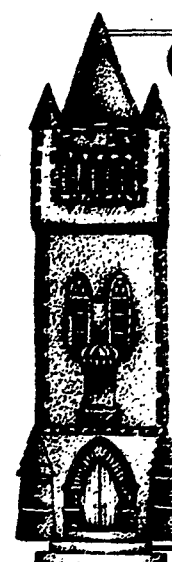
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