

COLUMNISTS

Church no longer in limbo about Limbo

The evolution of Catholic sacramental life since the Second Vatican Council provides a helpful example of the manner in which the church changes in significant ways without any essential corruption of its identity.

Before Vatican II there were seven sacraments. Today there are still seven sacraments.

Before the Second Vatican Council the Eucharist was regarded as the most important of the sacraments. Today the Eucharist is still regarded as the most important of the sacraments.

Before the Second Vatican Council couples sanctified their mutual love and fidelity in the sacrament of marriage. Today couples still sanctify their love and fidelity in marriage.

In spite of the many changes in the life of the church since, and because of, Vatican II, the essentials remain the same. In that sense, the late Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani's motto was correct: *Semper idem* ("Always the same"). He was referring to the church, of course.

There is an equally valid sense, however, in which the church does not remain the same. It changes, just as any living organism changes.

An 80-year-old woman is surely the same person she was when she was only 8, but she has changed so significantly not only in appearance but in profoundly personal ways that she is not really the same person she was 72 years ago.



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Indeed, if she were exactly the same, she'd have been institutionalized and spoken of, with much regret and sorrow by her loved ones, as having the mind and emotional makeup of an 8-year-old child. *Semper idem*, indeed.

Before the council baptism was regarded primarily as the sacrament that blotted out original sin rather than the first sacrament of initiation into the church.

Babies had to be baptized as soon as possible after birth. If they died before baptism, they could not go to heaven. Obstetric nurses were carefully trained in the art of emergency baptism.

In the tragic case of an infant death, the child was consigned forever to a place called Limbo — neither heaven nor hell, but a place of natural happiness.

Have you noticed, especially you older readers like myself, who have vivid memories of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, that no one talks about Limbo anymore?

Mind you, it's not even mentioned in the Catechism of the Catholic Church!

Catholics who hark back nostalgically to the 1950s really ought to be more concerned about the disappearance of Limbo than about the relatively minor issues that seem constantly to irritate them.

Without Limbo, what happens to babies who die without baptism? Some of the earliest fathers of the church — and some of the biggest names among them — had no problem answering the question. These babies go to hell, of course. Where else could they go? No grace, no heaven.

To be sure, theologians of St. Augustine's stature weren't completely heartless about the matter. He conceded that, in the mercy of God, children who died without baptism do not suffer all of the pains of hell because they committed no personal sins. But hell is still hell. Its wretched inhabitants will never see God, nor enjoy the company of the saints.

It took a fairly long period of time — measured in centuries, not years — before the church came gradually to acknowledge that these unbaptized children were not really condemned to eternal hellfire. But the medieval theologians had to invent a place for them, because they still couldn't fathom how unbaptized children could make it into heaven. Their invention was called Limbo (from a Latin word meaning "edge").

Limbo remained a practical part of

Catholic teaching right up to the Second Vatican Council. Any one of my readers over the age of 50 can attest to that.

They can also attest to the fact that Limbo provided little or no real spiritual comfort to those unfortunate women who lost their babies in childbirth or very soon thereafter.

Limbo was offered by the church as a kind of consolation prize, but the bereaved mothers knew better. To be separated eternally from their deceased child was a form of hell in itself.

But then, in 1962, the Catholic Church passed through a door marked "Vatican II" and, in 1965, came out another door marked "Exit." The church had Limbo in its doctrinal luggage when it went in; it didn't have it when it came out. And no one saw anyone take anything.

The late Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, once wrote that the council "tacitly buried" the doctrine of Limbo. It had to have been a private funeral.

Without Limbo, the primary purpose of baptism can no longer be the "removal" of original sin and the first infusion of saving grace. Instead, baptism is our rebirth in Christ and our initiation into his body, the church.

But we don't come empty-handed. God is already lovingly present to us from the beginning. The church calls that presence grace.

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

Forget the weeds, nurture the wheat

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 13:24-43. (R1) Wisdom 12:13, 16-19. (R2) Romans 8:26-27.

A foursome of golfers was watching a fellow golfer ahead of them. He was having difficulty. On the 13th hole, he put two shots into the pond. Finally, in complete frustration, he picked up his golf bag, spun around like a discus thrower, heaved the bag and clubs into the middle of the pond and stormed off the course, apparently forever.

Moments later, however, he returned. As he waded into the water the other golfers smiled as they recognized his embarrassment. Obviously, he had "come to his senses." He fished out the dripping bag, unzipped a pocket on the side, took out his car keys, and flung the bag once again, this time even farther than before. Then he went home.

I'm sure many a golfer has felt like doing the same thing, from time to time. Certainly, all of us at some time or another have gotten angry, frustrated, to our wit's end; and sometimes we bring that anger and frustration to church. The homily's too long or too short; the church is too warm or too cold; the hymns are too old or too new; the theology is old stuff, or if updated, it's modernism; and look who's going to Mass.

One of the parables in the Gospel to-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

day is about weeds in the church. Let's face it: People aren't perfect; not everybody is lovable. (Of course, that doesn't apply to us!)

Researchers say that 16 percent of the members of a church will never change. Why concentrate on them? Why not focus on the 84 percent who are trying hard to change and to do God's will? The servants in the Gospel wanted to work on the weeds. Jesus said, "Leave them alone until the harvest."

All of us are susceptible to having weeds grow in our hearts. Sometimes we say hurtful things; sometimes we do unloving acts; sometimes our relationships turn sour. There is no one so holy that he or she is beyond the reach of the power of sin. But the sad thing is that some people judge the Catholic faith by

the weaknesses of Catholics.

How do we deal with these weeds? First, if God is so good, where do the weeds come from? Genesis put the blame on two people: the devil and our first parents. In his parable, our Lord puts all the blame on just one person: the devil — "an enemy has done this."

What are we going to do about it? Destroy the evil people? That's what the servants wanted to do.

Jesus said, "No." He said, "Be patient." Even though weeds can never become wheat, bad people can become good people. That happened to Mary Magdalene and the thief on the cross.

So Jesus said, in effect, "Don't magnify evil in the world. Don't be too preoccupied with it. Good is stronger than evil. The wheat will grow despite the weeds."

In other words, it just doesn't pay to worry about any part of God's work. He is working in every part of the world, always, day and night. All worry is atheism, because it is a want of trust in God. Worry is useless; what is needed is trust.

We cannot worry about the weeds, about God's church, the parish, the school, business, work, people! The beloved Pope John XXIII had the right idea: He worked hard all day but at night he said, "God, this is your church. You

take care of it now. I'm going to bed."

All we need do is to pray as if all depended on God and to work as if all depended on self. And that is the only way to uproot the destructive weeds that can take root in our hearts and in the hearts of others in church.

But, as St. Paul tells us, "the Spirit will help us in our weakness." To grow in prayer, we simply need to let the Holy Spirit grow in our hearts and the harvest will be wheat, not weeds.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 22

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8; John 20:1-2, 11-18

Tuesday, July 23

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20;

Matthew 12:46-50

Wednesday, July 24

Jeremiah 1:1,4-10; Matthew 13:1-9

Thursday, July 25

2 Corinthians 4:7-15;

Matthew 20:20-28

Friday, July 26

Jeremiah 3:14-17;

Matthew 13:18-23

Saturday, July 27

Jeremiah 7:1-11; Matthew 13:24-30

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