

COLUMNISTS

Council altered understanding of priesthood

There is a sense in which, from the Middle Ages to the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church tended to over-value the sacrament of holy orders and to under-value the sacrament of baptism.

Although baptism also makes one an "other Christ," only those ordained to the priesthood were accorded that title, and with the clear implication that priests are more closely conformed to Christ than are the laity.

Although baptism makes one an active, not simply a passive, participant in the sacramental and ministerial life of the Church, only those ordained to the priesthood were regarded as true ministers of the Church, with the task of dispensing spiritual benefits to the laity.

Although baptism initiates one fully into the life of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, those ordained to the priesthood were considered to be called to, and actually to possess, a higher level of holiness than the merely baptized.

Although the sacrament of baptism also initiates one into a lifelong commitment to Christian ministry, during most of this millennium there was no period of preparation for baptism (the catechumenate), while candidates for the priesthood were given a long, carefully structured preparation for the reception of holy orders.

Fortunately, these imbalances were corrected by the Second Vatican Council.

With its stress on the church as the



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

whole people of God, the council acknowledged that all of the baptized participate in some way in the one priesthood of Christ and in the mission of the church itself (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, nn. 11, 30, 31).

Although the priesthood conferred in holy orders and the priesthood conferred in baptism differ from one another, according to the council, "in essence and not only in degree," each priesthood participates "in the one priesthood of Christ" (n. 10).

The whole mission of the church, the council insisted, applies equally to the laity, religious, and clergy (n. 30). Indeed, pastors "were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the church toward the world."

The function of the pastor is not to suppress the ministries and gifts of the laity, but rather to integrate and orchestrate them so that "all according to their

proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart" (n. 30).

All of the baptized, not just the ordained, are called to holiness (chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is entitled, "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness"). "As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ. They have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection" (n. 32).

The lay apostolate, therefore, is not simply a participation in the apostolate of the hierarchy, as the pre-Vatican II notion of Catholic Action had it. Rather, the lay apostolate is "a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself" (n. 33).

Christ gave the laity "a share in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of humankind" (n. 34).

He also conferred upon the laity a share in his prophetic, or magisterial, office. Consequently, the council urged that "the laity strive skillfully to acquire a more profound grasp of revealed truth, and insistently beg of God the gift of wisdom" (n. 35). No talk here of "the simple faithful," incapable of advancing beyond the mother's milk of catechism to the adult food of theology.

On the contrary, competent laity are not only "permitted" but "sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on things which concern the good of the

Church" (n. 37).

But if there is so much now for the laity to do, is there nothing left for the priest? Of course, there is. We call it pastoral leadership.

For example, it requires no real liturgical charisma for a priest simply to "say" Mass, using all the correct words and gestures. "Presiding" over a worshipping assembly is far more demanding. The priest must have the capacity to call a community to prayer and to nurture an atmosphere of communal worship. Easier "said" than done.

Moreover, the postconciliar priest isn't the only one who ministers; his most challenging pastoral task, as in the liturgy, is the coordinating and integrating of all other ministries and gifts so that "all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart" (n. 30).

To be sure, this notion of priestly ministry is a far cry from the sentimental eruptions on the back of 1940s' and 1950s' ordination holy cards ("My God, what a life, and it is yours, O priest of Jesus Christ!").

The point is that a priest is not ordained to "become" a priest, but to "do" priestly ministry on behalf of others.

In this postconciliar age, that is far more demanding than ever.

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

God responds to perseverance

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 15:21-28. (R1) Isaiah 56:1, 6-7. (R2) Romans 11:13-15, 29-32.

What can we say about the Canaanite woman in Sunday's Gospel? She was pushy, aggressive, assertive, and persistent — she would not be denied?

And what can we say about Jesus? His actions seemed so out of character for him.

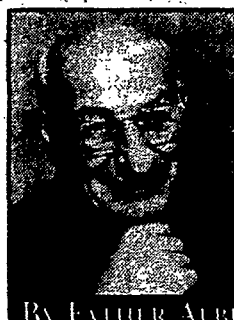
Here a woman cries out after him saying, "Have pity on me, Lord, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

No big deal. Jesus was an expert at dealing with demons. This would be easy for him. But Jesus did not answer the woman. He didn't even look in her direction. He didn't even acknowledge her existence.

Maybe her timing was poor. Jesus had left the Promised Land, because he had had it with the hostility of Herod Antipas, the Pharisees and the people around Capernaum. Moreover, he wanted to be incognito and to be alone with the apostles to complete their training. So he ignores this woman and enters a home of a friendly Jew to dine.

This woman was no shrinking violet. She followed Jesus right into the house and said, "Lord, help me."

Then Jesus said something that seems again so out of character for him. He said, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

Ow! Jesus would not have passed Political Correctness 101 with that answer. Was Jesus really calling Canaanites dogs? Well, Jews always referred to the gentiles as dogs. Jesus softened that, for in the Greek the word he used was for a household pet, a puppy!

Still, his curt answer did not deter the woman. She was as clever as she was persistent.

"Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters," she said.

Touche! Well put! Even Jesus was touched, for he said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And her daughter was healed.

What a lesson this woman can teach us. Whenever we need help, ask Jesus — but keep asking. The Chinese word for perseverance is represented by a knife

and a heart. What do you do when you feel ripped in half as that poor woman did by the affliction of her daughter? How do you persevere with a knife in your heart? This woman had a knife in her heart and just because the disciples tried to get rid of her and even Jesus ignored her, she wasn't going to quit trying. And neither should we.

One of the greatest doctors of the Church is St. Augustine. For many years he ran away from the faith of his mother. He followed heretical groups like the Manichaeans. He led a wayward life and had a child out of wedlock.

But Augustine's mother, St. Monica, devoted her whole life to praying for Augustine's conversion. At one point, when Augustine seemed snared by the Manichaean philosophy, Monica begged the great St. Ambrose to speak to her son and show him how wrong the Manichaean teachings were.

Ambrose refused. He thought Augustine was too smart to be deceived always by the Manichaeans. At this Monica began to cry. But Ambrose assured her saying, "Go, go! Live on as you are living. It is not possible that the son of such tears and prayers will ever be lost."

Ambrose was right. After many years and a fierce inner struggle, Augustine was touched by a passage from Scripture and became Catholic. When Monica learned of this, she said that she had

nothing left to live for now, for the greatest desire of her heart had been fulfilled. Nine days later, Monica died. And the son she had spent her life praying for went on to affect the whole world.

Monica never quit asking. Ambrose had told her that the son of such tears and prayers shall never be lost. Are you concerned about someone you love? Keep on asking God for help.

So often parents come and say, "Father, I raised my children Catholic, but now none of them practice the faith."

Well, keep on praying for them. Jesus will answer.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, August 19

Ezekiel 24:15-24; Matthew 19:16-22

Tuesday, August 20

Ezekiel 28:1-10; Matthew 19:23-30

Wednesday, August 21

Ezekiel 34:1-11; Matthew 20:1-16

Thursday, August 22

Ezekiel 36:23-28; Matthew 22:1-14

Friday, August 23

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 22:34-40

Saturday, August 24

Revelation 21:9-14; John 1:45-51

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Thomas Ryan, CSP
October 25 - 27

STANDING ON ROCK OR SINKING IN SAND?
Fr. John Mergenhagen
November 8 - 10

CHARISMATIC RETREAT
Richard McAlear, OMI
November 15 - 17

FINDING GOD ON THE JOB
Joseph Power, OSFS,
Ed & Mary Zablocki, SFO
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