

COLUMNISTS

Church applies reformed healing rites

There are two sacraments that are celebrated by the church as signs and instruments of Christ's abiding healing power: anointing of the sick (formerly extreme unction) and reconciliation, or penance (also known as confession).

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is for those whose bond of communion with Christ and the church has been weakened by serious illness or other physical incapacity. The sacrament of reconciliation is for those whose bond of communion with Christ and the church has been weakened or even severed by sin.

In each case, the purpose of the sacrament is to heal spiritually or physically sick members and to restore them to full communion with the church so that they can once again participate fully in its life and mission.

Jesus is disclosed in these two sacraments as one who heals and forgives, and the church is disclosed as a healing and forgiving community. But the healing and forgiving church is also a penitent church, bathing his feet with its tears and eager to hear his words, "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11).

To be sure, Jesus is always ready to forgive and to heal (e.g., Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:5-12; Luke 5:20-26). In all three reports of Jesus' cure of the paralytic at Capernaum, for example, there is mention of the forgiveness of sins.

The forgiveness of sins is also promi-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

nent in the preaching and ministry of the apostles (Acts of the Apostles 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).

The post-biblical history of the sacrament, however, has followed an uneven course. The pastoral practice in the earliest centuries limited the reception of penance to once in a lifetime. And since many delayed their baptism until the end of their lives, penance was also delayed, since baptism was regarded as a sacrament of forgiveness as well.

Penance was celebrated publicly, usually by the bishop. Not until the sixth century — thanks for the most part to the Celtic monks — did the practice of individual confession come into being, with the priest (not only the bishop) as the minister.

The once-in-a-lifetime public rite of penance did not officially end in the West until the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that all the baptized must confess their sins and receive

Holy Communion at least once a year.

This new law placed much greater demands on confessors. In order to assist them in their duties, penances were codified in penitential books containing lists of every kind of sin, with the exact type of penance attached.

The minister of the sacrament no longer functioned primarily as a healer and a reconciler. He was now primarily a judge. A technical formula of absolution — not part of the sacrament until the Middle Ages — was developed.

The Council of Trent (1551) further specified the content of the sacrament. It identified three basic elements: contrition, confession of all serious sins by number and kind, and satisfaction (that is, penance with a small "p"). According to Trent, only priests could absolve, and since absolution is a juridical act, the confessor had to have proper jurisdiction to do so.

The Second Vatican Council called for a revision of the rite and the formulae "so that they more clearly express both the nature and effect of the sacrament" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 72).

The reformed rite emphasizes the role of the whole community and makes the reading of Scripture central. The four forms of the new rite are: individual, communal with individual confession and absolution, communal with general absolution, and an abbreviated emergency ritual when death is imminent.

The basic structure of the first three

forms includes a prayer of welcome, a reading of Scripture (optional), a reflection on the word of God, confession with an expression of sorrow, a prayer of absolution, and a prayer of praise and dismissal.

In the new rite the minister functions more as a healer and a reconciler than as a judge. Emphasis is placed on conversion (as opposed to a kind of instant soul-wash approach). And communal celebration is provided for and encouraged. The latter, in fact, has proved far more popular than the traditional individual rite.

As we approach the annual celebration of Labor Day in the United States, we are reminded once again of the church's abiding responsibility to practice what it preaches about social justice and the rights of workers, including the right to unionize and to fair treatment and job security.

Whenever the church frustrates or denies these rights to its own employees, it commits a serious sin of injustice and an equally serious sin of scandal. The forgiving church becomes a church in need of forgiveness.

Like every good penitent, however, it must first acknowledge its sin, feel sorrow for it, and make a firm purpose of amendment. That includes making restitution. Labor Day is an appropriate time to remember that.

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

The 'Tempter' will take various forms

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 16: 21-27 (R1) Jeremiah 20:7-9. (R2) Romans 12:1-2.

After Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus explained to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter protested.

Jesus was unusually harsh with his good friend and blurted out, "Get behind me Satan."

Was Jesus calling Peter Satan?

Not really. Jesus was but acknowledging that the Tempter was still testing him and the greatest temptation of all was for him to forsake the mission to which God had called him. Forsake the cross.

Life calls for vigilance. For our "opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

Jesus knew that. He faced the Tempter throughout his life. After Satan had tempted him in the wilderness, the story ends with these words: "When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time."

Notice those words "for a time." Jesus would face the Tempter again and again. So shall we. Hence the need for eternal vigilance.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SILAMON

into temptation." He didn't mean that God might somehow tempt us to do wrong. He was simply saying that life has its snares. The Tempter is always present. We need God's help if we are to avoid the dangers that surround everyone who seeks to live the best life possible.

One ever-present temptation, for instance comes from such a tiny thing as a piece of plastic. It is so easy to buy when you know you're not going to see the statement for 45 days. And then you have another 30 days to pay your debt. And if you are up to the limit, no big deal. Just get another card. You get offers all the time. You can get a cash advance on one card to help pay off another.

One of the first steps in getting our finances in order is to quit using credit cards. Most people have too many cards.

Last year on an airline flight there was a contest to see who had the most credit cards. One person had 16 credit cards. He won the contest. How much is enough? One card is, but are we not tempted to want more? Be vigilant!

Besides vigilance, we need the ability to resist temptation. Remember the famous Marshmallow Experiment. A scientist felt he could see the future by watching 4-year-olds interact with a marshmallow. The scientist invited children one by one, into a room and said, "You can have this marshmallow right now; or, if you wait while I run an errand, you can have two marshmallows when I return." He left.

Some children grabbed for the marshmallow the minute he left the room. Some struggled for a few minutes before they gave in. But others were determined to wait. They covered their eyes put their heads down; sang to themselves; played games or even fell asleep. When the scientist returned, he gave these children their two hard-earned marshmallows. Then he waited for them to grow up.

By time they reached high school, parents and teachers found out that those who as 4-year-olds had the fortitude to hold out for the second marshmallow generally grew up to be better adjusted, more popular, adventurous, confident and dependable teenagers. The children

who gave in to temptation early on were more likely to be lonely, easily frustrated and stubborn. They buckled under stress and shied away from challenges. On the Scholastic Aptitude Test, they scored much lower than the other group.

The ability to resist temptation, to delay gratification, to control one's urges is one of life's great success skills.

Life calls for vigilance, for the ability to resist temptation. When we are tempted to turn back from our mission in life say, "Get behind me, Satan."

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

Daily Readings

Monday, September 2

1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Luke 4:16-30

Tuesday, September 3

1 Corinthians 2:10-16; Luke 4:31-37

Wednesday, September 4

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Luke 4:38-44

Thursday, September 5

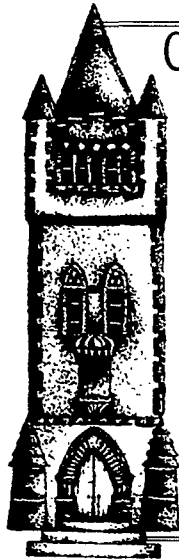
1 Corinthians 3:18-23; Luke 5:1-11

Friday, September 6

1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Luke 5:33-39

Saturday, September 7

1 Corinthians 4:6-15; Luke 6:1-5



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