

# COLUMNISTS

## Verb change produces ecumenical consequences

In one of the most important ecumenical addresses given since Vatican II, Cardinal Jan Willebrands, former president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (1968-89), challenged a latter-day interpretation of the council's teaching on the relationship of the Catholic Church to the other churches in the Body of Christ.

In his speech, given in Atlanta on May 5, 1987, Cardinal Willebrands argued that, contrary to the efforts of some to downplay its significance, the change of verbs in article 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from "is" to "subsists in" was of major ecumenical consequence.

The previous draft of the text equated the Body of Christ with the Catholic Church: "This Church ... is the Catholic Church. ..." This means that non-Catholic churches are not really part of the Body of Christ. Only the Catholic Church is.

However, the final version of the text reads: "This Church ... subsists in the Catholic Church. ..." This means that the Catholic Church is not alone in the Body of Christ. There are other churches as well.

Cardinal Willebrands pointed out that the Western tradition has for centuries implicitly acknowledged that the Body of Christ extends beyond the limits of the Catholic Church. From the time of Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), official Catholic statements have always regarded the Or-



essays in  
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

thodox churches as authentic churches.

For example, the Council of Florence's formula of union between Greeks and Latins (1439) began with these words: "Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad. For the wall which separated the Western and Eastern churches has been taken away, and peace and harmony restored."

The statement recognized that, despite the break in communion between Rome and Constantinople, the churches on both sides of the schismatic divide had retained their genuine apostolic, eucharistic, and ecclesial identity.

In its relations with the Christian bodies resulting from the Reformation, Cardinal Willebrands pointed out, "the Catholic Church has been led little by little to discover not only that their baptism is valid, but that they produce fruits of grace."

With the passing of the "polemical fever" of the counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church came to recognize that in those non-Catholic communities

"there is an evangelical life which can have no other source but Christ and his Spirit" (see the Decree on Ecumenism, nn. 20-23).

"But to talk about the effectual work of the Spirit of Christ in communities which explicitly confess God in Jesus Christ," the cardinal asked, "is this not already to talk of the church?"

He called particular attention to a conciliar speech given by Cardinal Lienart of France — a speech, according to Cardinal Willebrands, that "gave the tone to the entire council debate on the subject."

Cardinal Lienart declared that "the relation of the Roman Church to the mystical body, their identity, must never be stated as though the mystical body is totally confined within the bounds of the Roman Church. The Roman Church is truly the body of Christ, but does not exhaust that body."

Although Cardinal Lienart expressed personal sadness that separated Christians "do not enjoy with us all the supernatural gifts of which (the Body of Christ) is the dispenser," he insisted that he "would not dare to say that they do not belong in any way to the mystical body of Christ, even though they are not incorporated in the Catholic Church."

According to Cardinal Willebrands the "subsists in" language of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church can only be understood in the setting of an ecclesiology of communion, that is, an under-

standing of the church that stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in creating and sustaining the unity of all Christians with one another and of all churches with one another — and ultimately with the triune God.

"Indeed," the cardinal noted, "if the church is fundamentally this communion with the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, we can see that on the one hand the depth of this communion determines the depth of incorporation in the church, and on the other that it cannot be a question of all or nothing."

The "subsists in" language, therefore, is "an attempt to express the transcendence of grace and to give an inkling of the breadth of divine benevolence."

That is why the council's Decree on Ecumenism taught that those who believe in Christ and who have been baptized are brought in "a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church."

Even though important differences may remain, "all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ" (n. 3).

While we should never make too little of the distinctiveness of the Catholic Church, the greater danger has been to make too much of it — to the detriment of the other churches that share with us even now an honorable place in the Body of Christ.

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

## Forgive 77 times; or better yet, always

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 18:21-35. (R1) Sirach 27:30-28:7. (R2) Romans 14:7-9.

One day Peter approached Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?"

In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus had said, "If you brother sins against you, go to him and be reconciled." Peter now wanted to know how many times he should do this. Before Jesus could answer, Peter suggested seven times.

Seven seemed like a good number. Seven was regarded as the perfect number in Scripture. Aristotle said seven is the perfect number because a perfect head has seven openings. Peter thought he had given an exceptional answer. The rabbis taught that one forgive only three times; if there was a fourth offense, then God would take care of the offender.

To forgive one seven times is a lot. The average person finds it hard to forgive even once. Peter had doubled the amount required by Jewish law. Yet Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." Wow! Jesus was offering a whole new standard on forgiveness.

Jesus wanted us to understand that forgiveness is an attitude, a way of life.

He illustrated what he meant by a parable. A servant owed his king a vast sum, a figure comparable to the national debt. The servant could never pay it off, so the



a word  
for  
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

king forgave him the entire debt. You would think that this act of forgiveness would change the servant's entire outlook on life. Not so. He ran into his fellow servant who owed him a pittance — a mere nothing, compared to what he had owed.

He grabbed the fellow servant and started choking him. "Pay back what you owe." The fellow servant used the exact words the servant had said to the king. "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full."

The servant was unmoved and threw the fellow into prison. What a jerk!

When the other servants heard what he had done, they were shocked. The king soon learned about it, and enraged, berated the servant and threw him into prison to spend the rest of his life in hard labor.

The point is obvious. We forgive others because God has forgiven us. That is what empowers us to forgive. We have

been forgiven an enormous debt, for we measure an offense by the dignity of the one offended. Sin is an offense against God, and therefore, something infinite — a billion dollars. Hurting another person is an offense against a neighbor, and so, something finite — a hundred dollars. God forgives us; all the more should we forgive others.

A.J. Cronin, the novelist, was also a doctor. His first assignment was to a Welsh town where he performed his first surgery on a little girl suffering from diphtheria. Cronin did a tracheotomy and her condition improved, but she was still critical.

Afterward, Cronin told the nurse on duty, "I'm going to try to get some sleep. When this tube clogs up, take it out immediately and clean it. Then come and get me."

Within hours, the tube did clog up. Instead of taking it out, however, the young nurse panicked and ran for the doctor. By the time Cronin got to the girl, she was dead. Cronin was furious.

The very next day he wrote a letter recommending that this young nurse's license be revoked. He called her in and read the letter to her. The nurse, close to tears, pleaded for a second chance. Cronin was unrelenting. However, her words haunted him all night. Upon awaking in the morning he suddenly remembered that once he had offered to Christ

the same exact plea: "Give me a second chance." The nurse was given a second chance and went on to become the superintendent of the biggest children's hospital in Britain.

How often God has given us a second chance, forgiven us! How many times are we to forgive another? There is no limit. Forgiveness must be a way of life for us, as it is for God.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, September 16**

1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33;  
Luke 7:1-10

**Tuesday, September 17**

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31;  
Luke 7:11-17

**Wednesday, September 18**

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13;  
Luke 7:31-35

**Thursday, September 19**

1 Corinthians 15:1-11;  
Luke 7:36-50

**Friday, September 20**

1 Corinthians 15:12-20, 22-27;  
Luke 8:1-3

**Saturday, September 21**

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13;  
Matthew 9:9-13

**ARNDT**  
FUNERAL HOME  
*Family Owned & Operated*

**RONALD JOHN ARNDT**  
**ROBERT J. ARNDT**  
**SHARI L. ARNDT**  
Funeral Directors  
**225-6350**  
1118 Long Pond Road  
(South of Maiden Lane)

**HART**  
MONUMENT  
COMPANY  
*Since 1856*

Monuments, Markers  
and Cemetery Lettering

2301 Dewey Avenue  
(OPPOSITE HOLY SEPULCHRE CEMETERY)  
**(716) 865-6746**

**A QUIET OASIS IN THE HEART OF GREECE.**

**GREGIAN GARDEN APARTMENTS**

Walking distance from the largest mall east of the Mississippi, plus churches, restaurants, a senior center, doctors, a hospital, supermarkets, & other amenities in the neighborhood make ours the best location. Larger-Than-Most apartments with expansive grounds & parking make ours the best value. See our beautiful furnished models today.

Senior discounts available. **716-225-3510** Heat, hot water included.