

COLUMNISTS

Image of church's center still inspires

In the last column, I wrote about lay ministry. That piece provoked quite a bit of mail sent to me. To some people, the column seemed to represent a single-handed attempt to destroy the church. To others, it seemed to save the church from certain destruction at the hands of anyone who might raise a question about what I had said. Amazing!

But as I read through the letters, I was reminded of an exercise a teacher of mine once invited us to do. We were discussing "What do you think of when you hear the word 'church'?" — the kind of thing only graduate students have time for. The teacher was himself a Methodist teaching at a Catholic university; about half of the students were Catholic and half were from other Christian denominations.

By the time we finished the exercise, it was clear to us that for students trained in traditional Catholic upbringings, the primary images of church were centered in three places: buildings, the Vatican, and a mixture of "hierarchical figures" like the pope, bishops, priests and nuns. Our Protestant colleagues pictured their local church building, instead of an international center, and their local congregations.

I have recalled that simple exercise



the
moral
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

many times since. I have also come through several different phases of "images of the church." But a primary experience for me was coming into close contact with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. If I had to select one passage from any church document that changed my thinking about the church, I would point to the opening sentences from "The Church in the Modern World."

I still read that passage with a mix of excitement and awe, because for me, it completely changed my notion of the church — a notion I had held since childhood.

The passage is this: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or

afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in our hearts. For ours is a community composed of those who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onward toward the kingdom of God and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all."

We ought to be filled with a sense of gratitude to the genius of those who met at Vatican II and framed a new vision of the church not for the past, but for the future. What that passage did for me the first time I heard it, and what it does still, is call me to a better, nobler, wiser understanding of what the church is, where it is primarily located, and who conducts its mission.

The church depicted in that passage is a church located not only and not primarily in sanctuaries and worship spaces or in religion classes, rectories or convents. The church is that located in the midst of human life: in the midst of the primary human (not just Christian, not just "religious") experience of joy and hope, grief and anguish. The church is found especially among those who are poor and afflicted.

I can still remember my awareness that

the council was telling us strongly and clearly that if we want to experience church, we should go to where the "poor and afflicted" are, and live and work there.

The passage also announces to us that the church isn't primarily a bi-level community with priests, nuns and other special citizens on a "higher" level than everyone else. It indicates that the church is a community of those who spend themselves on behalf of the kingdom of God by bringing the great good news of salvation — found and proclaimed especially among the poor and afflicted. The source of the unity of that kingdom-centered group is Christ and the Spirit.

As I sit here today I can't help but think that we should plaster that passage all over our walls and on our steering wheels and on our refrigerators and anywhere else we can think of. (If nothing else, it might take our minds off how other people dress at Mass!) The church described in that passage is so much more than our superficial and comfortable imaginings. It is an important community dedicated to an important task — one of incredible urgency and to be undertaken by all of us.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

Methodist baptism valid in Catholic Church

Q. Our family is Catholic going back many generations. Some have left the church, but I didn't think it would happen in our own family.

One of our sons, when he was married to a non-Catholic, said in the papers he signed that he would continue his Catholic faith, and would do everything he could to raise his children Catholic also.

A few years ago, however, he joined another church, the Methodists, with his wife. Recently their child, our grandson, was baptized in their church.

Our priest has been a great help in many ways, but we haven't received a solid answer to one matter that concerns us. According to Catholic teaching, is our grandchild really baptized?

Whatever the differences, we would not want him deprived of that. Can you explain, and give us something we can tell our son and our other children?

— New Jersey

A. In a word, the answer is yes. The Catholic Church clearly recognizes the validity of baptisms in many other Christ-



question
corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

ian churches.

There's nothing brand new about this. Thirty years ago, Vatican Council II referred to baptism as one of the sacramental bonds that link us with other Christian churches.

In one place, the council says, the Christian way of life of these (Protestant) brethren is nourished by faith in Christ. It is strengthened by the grace of baptism and the hearing of God's word. (Decree on Ecumenism, n. 2)

About 20 years before that the church explicitly mentioned Lutherans, Pres-

byterians, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Disciples of Christ as among those who should not be baptized again if they convert to the Catholic faith.

The reason is that there is no reason to doubt the validity of the baptism they received in the church they belonged to previously.

As you imply the promise or affirmation made when your son was married added nothing to the responsibilities any believing and committed Catholic has as she or he enters marriage.

Those who take their religious commitments seriously (and for Catholics this would include their beliefs concerning the church, the Eucharist, the sacraments, etc.) have a serious responsibility to do everything they can for their own faith, and to provide their children an opportunity for that same relationship with God.

Sometimes, however, even the best efforts and intentions do not work out, and it's impossible for us to get into anyone else's conscience to know their relation-

ship to God in these matters.

This is why the affirmation made by a Catholic before an interfaith marriage is worded as you stated: He or she will do everything within their power to share their Catholic faith with their children, and hold onto it themselves.

Your son's experience is one more evidence of how seriously couples should take their religious convictions at the time of marriage.

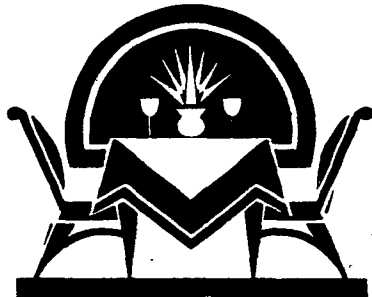
One of the primary purposes of the church's requirements before marriage is to bring the couple to a serious dialogue about how they will keep and respect their own and each other's consciences in their religious lives.

(A free brochure with questions Catholics ask about baptism practices and sponsors is available by sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to Father John Dietzen, Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, IL 61701.)

Father Dietzen is pastor of Holy Trinity Church. Questions may be sent to him there.

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