

# COLUMNISTS

## Hierarchical issues do matter

I had originally planned to devote this week's column to an article in the Oct. 19 edition of *America* magazine by Kenneth Untener, bishop of Saginaw, Mich.: "How Bishops Talk."

Despite its innocuous title and the benign caption on its first page, the article is really a pointed essay that skewers five U.S. cardinals for their manner of rebutting two recent initiatives by fellow bishops: the Catholic Common Ground Project launched in August by Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in the hope of resolving intra-church conflict through dialogue; and retired Archbishop John Quinn's speech critical of the Vatican's governing style, given at Oxford University in June.

But then I thought of those Catholics who complain that too much time, energy and newsprint are wasted on issues that are of concern only to the most organizationally active members of the church.

The general membership, they insist, are more interested in their own spiritual lives, in the quality of worship in their parishes and in the effectiveness of ministry to their children and aging parents. How the Curia relates to the U.S. hierarchy, who succeeds whom as bishop and who is eligible for ordination to the priesthood are of secondary importance.

That criticism is too important to be ig-



essays in  
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

nored. Which is not to say that the criticism is valid. In my judgment, it is not.

Who succeeds whom as the bishop of a diocese and who is eligible for ordination to the priesthood have a direct and profound bearing on our spiritual lives, on the quality of worship in our parishes, and on the effectiveness of ministry at all levels.

Priests must be approved for ordination by a bishop. Where they are prepared for ordination is also determined by a bishop.

What kind of men are ordained for a particular diocese? What kind are rejected? It depends on the bishop.

In a given parish the quality of worship and ministry depends largely on the pastor. It is he who sets the tone. He either establishes and cultivates an environment where collaboration prevails and where the best ideas are treated with respect, re-

gardless of their source, or he rules in an authoritarian manner, closed to all ideas but his own and those he considers approved by the church — usually a distinction without a difference.

A healthy pastor is not threatened by strong women, nor does he appeal to his priestly status to resolve conflicts. In a word, he is pastoral: patient, kind, understanding, compassionate, secure and firm only when firmness is needed.

Such pastors are a gift to any parish, but they are becoming increasingly scarce due to death and retirement.

Surveys show that many young men with a aptitude for pastoral ministry are discouraged today for pursuing it primarily because of lifelong obligatory celibacy and due to the manner in which authority is often exercised in the church. Such potential candidates tend to be creative and intellectually discriminating at a time when the organization prefers loyalty, obedience and conformity.

That situation won't change unless and until there is a different cast of church leaders — men open to change who acknowledge that celibacy has nothing essential to do with the priesthood and who exercise authority, like Jesus, in the manner of servants rather than of royal officials.

As long as that situation does not

change, the numbers of good-to-excellent pastors will continue to decline and the basic spiritual, liturgical and ministerial needs that ordinary parishioners take for granted will be increasingly unmet.

So it does make a difference who your bishop is. And it does make a difference how and why your bishop got selected. And it does make a difference what criteria are used for recruiting and training candidates for the priesthood.

It all comes out in the wash at the parish level. It is at the parish level that the church is most vividly the church. It is there that the faithful relate themselves to the church and to the faith that it proclaims.

In recent decades, however, many Catholics have begun to draw a sharper line between the church and its faith. The numbers of Catholics who still consider themselves Catholic in faith but not ecclesiastically or institutionally continues to grow.

Catholics who are concerned about that trend and would like to see it reversed had better take more seriously the issues that some of them have been wont to dismiss.

That said, we'll take up Bishop Untener's provocative article next time.

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

## Be ready for the 'bridegroom'

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Matthew 25:1-13. (R1) Wisdom 6:12-16. (R2) 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17.

The last Sundays of the church year look toward the coming of the Lord. Each Sunday views this coming from a different angle. Next Sunday the theme is that his coming will be unexpected; be ready!

Jesus illustrates this point with a parable. In the days of our Lord, a wedding was a great occasion: Everybody turned out for it. The climax of the wedding came when the groom fetched the bride to lead her to his home. Often the longest route was taken so that as many of the villagers as possible could join the party.

There was no honeymoon. Instead, friends brought food and the couple stayed at home, treated like king and queen. The festivities went on for a week. It was from this joyful feast that the five foolish virgins were excluded.

A bride usually had 10 maidens to accompany her to the groom's house. A common ploy at the wedding was to try and catch this bridal party "napping."

So, often the groom would come in the middle of the night. Someone would run on ahead and shout, "The bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him." In our Lord's day no one was allowed to go out



a word  
for  
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp.

Our Lord's parable was an attack on the Jewish leaders. For centuries God had been preparing them for the groom. He came in Jesus and they weren't prepared.

So, to us there is a double warning.

First, don't let things go to the last minute. We cannot neglect the present and be ready for the future. As Longfellow put it:

"Trust no future how'er pleasant,  
Let the dead past bury its dead;  
Act, act in the living present!  
Heart within, God o'erhead."

Everyone knows what happens to a student who puts off his studies to the night before the exams. It is too late to wait till death to change one's life, to go to con-

fession, to get ready for the judgment.

I was watching a pro football game a few Monday nights ago. One player got hurt and a reserve rushed in. He didn't wait till he was called into the game to get ready to play. He may have sat on the bench for many games without being called to play. Nonetheless, he prepared everyday to be ready when called in.

Every lead actor on the stage has an understudy — men and women who are prepared to go on the stage at a moment's notice. The moment may be long in coming, but nonetheless the understudy prepares long before the chance to perform.

How much more ought we to be prepared for the greatest call in life: the bridegroom's call to us into eternity.

Another point — I used to think the wise virgins were very uncharitable for not sharing their oil. However, I believe that our Lord was trying to teach us that certain things cannot be borrowed. There are certain things nobody can do for us, we've got to do them for ourselves. No one can learn for us. No one can live our lives. No one can go to the judgment seat with us.

Are we being foolish abusing time by using it only for this world or are we being wise readying ourselves for the bridegroom?

Life is short — and death is sure;  
The hour of death remains obscure.  
A soul you have — an only one. If that be  
lost, all hope is gone.

Waste not your time, while time shall  
last.

For after death, 'tis ever past.  
The all-seeing God your judge will be —  
Or heaven or hell your destiny.  
All earthly things will fleet away.  
Eternity shall ever stay.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, November 11**

Titus 1:1-9; Luke 17:1-6

**Tuesday, November 12**

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14; Luke 17:7-10

**Wednesday, November 13**

Titus 3:1-7; Luke 17:11-19

**Thursday, November 14**

Philemon 7-20; Luke 17:20-25

**Friday, November 15**

2 John 4-9; Luke 17:26-37

**Saturday, November 16**

3 John 5-8; Luke 18:1-8

### Dining Guide

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Look for the Winter Sports Supplement  
in the November 21 issue of the Catholic Courier