

COLUMNISTS

'Middle' Catholics want common sense

The best thing about the Catholic Common Ground Project (now known as the Catholic Common Ground Initiative) was its originator, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, who died Nov. 14. No one in the Catholic Church today had a greater record of achievement as a builder of common ground than he did.

A healer, reconciler and peacemaker par excellence, his death is a matter of the gravest consequence for the Catholic Church in the United States. No other member of the hierarchy had earned the credibility he enjoyed across the entire ecclesiastical spectrum. The church will surely go on after him, but he leaves behind a void of mammoth proportions.

The Common Ground Initiative will continue, but it will not make much real progress without Cardinal Bernardin's sure and steady leadership and before the end of the current pontificate.

According to reports, last month's Common Ground advisory committee meeting in Chicago did more than substitute the word "initiative" for "project" in the official title. It also changed its focus, from trying to promote reconciliation between opposing parties in the church to attempting to revitalize the vast middle of the U.S. Catholic Church.

This "middle" constitutes the majority



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

of active parishioners throughout the country. They attend Mass regularly, enroll their children in religious education programs or in parochial schools, and engage from time to time in sacramental and ministerial activities in their parish.

The expectations of the "middle" Catholic are not difficult to identify. What they seek in their parish life is not "common ground," but "common sense."

They want sensible, well-planned liturgies presided over by a psychologically healthy and pastorally competent priest, and homilies that come from the depths of his faith, theological learning and ordinary human experience.

No boiler-plate calls for "loyalty to the Holy Father." No shelling of liberal targets. No shapeless, repetitive, rambling oratory. The "middle" Catholic wants a

healthy environment not only for worship, but for all of the other sacramental and ministerial activities of their parish.

They want a solid religious education program, with trained teachers using the best teaching tools and texts. And they certainly do not want their children coming home disturbed about some teacher's idiosyncratic references to the devil, or stories about people going to hell for real or imagined spiritual "fender-benders."

When their children are ready for marriage, "middle" Catholics expect them, their intended spouses, and their families and friends to be treated with warmth and patience, especially if it happens to be an ecumenical or interfaith marriage.

And when their aging parents are sick and dying, or when tragedy hits, they welcome the support and spiritual consolation of a priest who knows what human sorrow is all about and who can sympathize without being preachy or pietistic.

If it is to have any chance at all to succeed, the Common Ground Initiative needs to admit that the pastoral expectations of "middle" Catholics cannot be satisfied unless there are still enough good pastors to go around. And there aren't.

That problem is related to who is going into seminaries — and who is not. And why. And it is related to who becomes a

bishop — and who does not. And why.

"Middle" parishioners in general and parish ministers in particular are not caught in any kind of crossfire between left and right. If they are dodging any bullets, those bullets are coming from only one side, not two.

The volleys come from people without an adequate understanding of theology, biblical scholarship and the requirements of pastoral life.

Directors of religious education, for example, aren't being harassed by left-wing Catholics demanding the adoption of a textbook series that reduces Christianity to a program of social revolution and promotes same-sex marriages. If DREs are badgered at all, it is by people on the right with their wildly clicking heresy-detectors.

For the right, anything opposed to their own religious opinions is heresy or tantamount to it. And they want to throw the "heretics" out of the church, or at least out of their jobs.

The "middle" Catholic would like the dedicated women and men who serve them and their families in their parishes to be able to get on with their work.

Common sense, not common ground.

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

Be a light of faith for others

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark (R1) Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7. (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

The first Sunday of Advent is here. Mother is at Mass, thinking about the shopping to be done, all the programs, parties and school activities to attend.

All the activities she would be involved with during the coming weeks consume her mind: Children should all have haircuts, cookies should be baked, decorations need to be put up, gifts must be bought, cards and notes must be sent and on and on it goes.

Then she hears the Gospel: "Watch, the Lord will come when you least expect him."

Christmas has a way of sneaking up on us.

Advent seems out of sync with the festive activities going on all around us. Advent is a season of preparation. It is a time to look both to the future and back to the past. We look forward to Christ's coming again as he promised the Apostles he would. At the same time we celebrate his birth and coming long ago in Bethlehem.

If we knew exactly when Christ will return we could pencil him into our busy schedules. If we only knew when, we could



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

clean up our lives. But we don't know when. We can count the number of days until Christmas, but we cannot count the number of days until Christ will return.

So, Jesus tells us to keep alert — "Watch."

Not too long ago, I visited the ancient city called Pompeii on the southwest coast of Italy. It is near Mt. Vesuvius. In 79 A.D., Mt. Vesuvius erupted. Pompeii was covered with ash and pumice at a rate of six inches per hour. The city was soon buried under nine feet of ash and pumice.

Archaeologists in uncovering that city found the remains of many bodies preserved in hardened ash. What is most interesting is that a guard who stood at the gate of the city was found at his post. His

hands still clutched his weapon. He had been commanded to stand watch and even in the face of death he remained at his post, faithful to his duty to the end.

What a picture of fidelity for us! Christ has asked us to be faithful, alert, vigilant, watchful till he comes. How happy we shall be if he finds us watching.

We look around and see all the violence and tragedy in our world today and ask, "Why doesn't Jesus come and put an end to all this?" The Lord does see the chaos of our world and longs to come, but he waits and spares us judgment a little longer so that we might have a bit more time to get our lives in order. When a mother gives her child something to do and she finds he or she hasn't done it yet, the child will respond, "Give me a little more time and I'll get it done."

A mother tells about when her daughter was small and got the part of the Bethlehem star in a Christmas play. After her first rehearsal, she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board.

"What exactly will you be doing in the play?" her mother asked her.

"I just stand there and shine," her

daughter answered.

What an answer! That is all God expects us to do. Let your light shine before others, your good example, good works, love and kindness. Be a shining light to others. That is all Jesus expects. That is what he meant by asking us to watch. Delay does not mean he is not coming. He is giving us time to get our lives together.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 2

Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 8:5-11

Tuesday, December 3

Isaiah 11:1-10; Luke 10:21-24

Wednesday, December 4

Isaiah 25:6-10; Matthew 15:29-37

Thursday, December 5

Isaiah 26:1-6; Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Friday, December 6

Isaiah 29:17-24; Matthew 9:27-31

Saturday, December 7

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26;

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 6-8

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Kodak Theatre On The Ridge
200 Ridge Road West, Rochester

Tickets available at Logos, Alpha & Omega, Lemstone and Reader's Revival Bookstores or at the door. Tickets are \$12.00 for adults and \$6.00 for children. Fund raising benefit for Faith Haven, a Christian Maternity Home in Naples.

This concert will feature music from Steve Green's new Christmas disc. Steve will be joined by the Roberts Wesleyan Chorale under the direction of Dr. Robert Shewan, and Pearce Memorial Children's Choir.

Don't miss this concert as it is his only appearance in New York this year.

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