

# COLUMNISTS

## Focus on what unites us

The original purpose of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18-25) was to open the minds and hearts of Christians and of their churches to the unifying activity of the Holy Spirit through prayers for another, with one another and for the unity of the worldwide church.

In recent years, the week of prayer has also taken on a broader, interfaith dimension that reaches beyond the needs and hopes of the fractured Christian community to embrace those of the larger family of non-Christian religious communities.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's appeal to Catholics to seek common ground among themselves is equally appropriate in the ecumenical and interfaith spheres. We should focus on what unites us rather than what divides us, particularly if what divides us does not pertain to the core of our relationships with God and one another.

Jesus himself insisted that it is not the one who says, "Lord, Lord," who enters the reign of God, but the one who does the will of God (Matthew 7:21).

What is more important, therefore: that a non-Christian comes to an explicit faith in Jesus as the Christ, or that a non-Christian actually lives in accordance with the teachings and example of Jesus?

Unfortunately, the Christian world has



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

always been filled with people who claim to believe in Christ and yet who oppress and slaughter one another, sometimes in Christ's name.

The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, beginning on Aug. 24, 1572, involved the wholesale killing of French Protestants (Huguenots) who were in Paris for the wedding of the future Henry IV. The massacre spread to other parts of France and caused the resumption of the religious wars that raged there between 1562 and 1598.

Sadly, when Pope Gregory XIII in Rome received the news of the massacre, he celebrated with a singing of the *Te Deum* (a hymn of praise), and services of thanksgiving for the victory over the heretics. He would also give his personal support some seven years later to various plots to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I of England.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (better known by its Latin title, *Nostra Aetate*, "In our day") affirmed the central point of this week's column; namely, that "to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations," the church must reflect "on what people have in common and what tends to bring them together" (n. 1).

"Humanity forms but one community," the council stated. We are all created by the same God. God's providence, goodness and saving love are for everyone, not just Christians, and certainly not just Catholics. We all look forward to the day we are "gathered together in the holy city which is illumined by the glory of God, and in whose splendor all peoples will walk."

*Nostra Aetate* acknowledged that there is "a certain awareness of a hidden power," namely God, which is "found among different peoples" and which imbues their lives "with a deep religious sense" (n. 2).

The council explicitly praised Hinduism for its sense of mystery, its asceticism, its meditative spirit, and its "recourse to God in confidence and love."

Buddhism, it said, "testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world," and proposes a way of life by which we can "attain a state of perfect liberation

and reach supreme illumination."

The Catholic Church, the council insisted, "rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions." Indeed, they "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women."

*Nostra Aetate* also singled out Islam and Judaism for special praise. The Muslims, it noted, "highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting" (n. 3).

The council urged both sides "to forget the past" and to make a sincere effort "to achieve mutual understanding."

Jews, of course, have a special place and role in the divine plan of salvation. They remain "very dear to God," who "does not take back the gifts bestowed on them or the choice made of them" (n. 4).

"Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and promote mutual understanding and appreciation."

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity offers the opportunity and challenge both to broaden our ecumenical horizons, and to focus on what we have in common.

Common ground rather than a battleground.

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

## Obsession with sex ignores sacredness

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) John 1:35-42. (R1) 1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19. (R2) 1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20.

The second reading next Sunday deserves our reading and rereading. Today we seem to be a nation obsessed with an unhealthy approach to sex. Turn on your television, open up national magazines, listen to the latest popular song and you'll find casual and uncommitted sex as a constant theme.

Sex is one of God's most beautiful gifts to us. We don't have to be prudish about it. Sex fills a very important place in our lives. But sex is sacred, given us by God. Yet sex has become a national obsession.

Back in the 1960s *Newsday* reporter Mike McGrady saw that the newest books were focusing on sex. McGrady observed that writers didn't even need talent if they could fill their books with sex talk. To prove his point, he got 24 *Newsday* staff members to write a book of sleaze. Each wrote one chapter. There were only three conditions: Finish it in a week, fill it with sex, and let the writing be mediocre or bad.

In a week all the chapters were in. McGrady and Harvey Aronson spent 18 months editing the material. They got McGrady's sister-in-law to pose as the author under a pen name. They titled the book



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

*Naked Came the Stranger*. It was a hit, selling more than one million copies. It was translated into 16 languages. When the 24 authors finally admitted publicly that it was all a hoax, book sales went up even higher.

We can observe that same phenomenon on television. All that writers need is a steamy bedroom scene. Statistics show that married people are far more sexually active than unmarried people, but you'd never know it from television.

Years ago, Phyllis George interviewed Roger Staubach. One question was, "Roger, how do you feel when you compare yourself with Joe Namath, who is so sexually active and has a different woman on his arm every time we see him?"

"Phyllis," Staubach replied calmly, "I'm sure I'm as sexually active as Joe. The dif-

ference is that all of mine is with one woman."

That's God's answer to sex. One man committed to one woman for a lifetime! That's the first thing that needs to be said about sex.

The second thing to be done is to teach that perspective to our young people.

A young man said to his grandfather, "Granddad, your generation didn't have all the social diseases we have. What did you wear to have safe sex?"

The wise old man replied, "A wedding ring."

The best oral contraceptive when you are young and unmarried is the word, "No!" To use the hand to steal is wrong. To use the tongue to lie is wrong. To use sex outside of marriage is to abuse the whole body, very wrong.

Ann Landers once received the following letter: "Dear Ann, I have been sleeping with three women for several months. Until a few days ago, all went fine, none knew the others existed. By chance they found me out. Now they are furious with me. What shall I do? P.S. Please don't give me any of your moral junk. Signed, Trapped."

Ann answered: "Dear Trapped, The one major thing that separates man from animals is a God-given sense of morality.

Since you don't have any morality, consult a veterinarian."

It's a crying shame that we've strayed so far from sound moral values.

St. Paul said, "The body is not for immorality. ... Your bodies are members of Christ. Shun lewd conduct. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at what a price! So glorify God in your body."

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

### Daily Readings

- Monday, January 20**  
Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 2:18-22
- Tuesday, January 21**  
Hebrews 6:10-20; Mark 2:23-28
- Wednesday, January 22**  
Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17; Mark 3:1-6
- Thursday, January 23**  
Hebrews 7:25-8:6; Mark 3:7-12
- Friday, January 24**  
Hebrews 8:6-13; Mark 3:13-19
- Saturday, January 25**  
Acts 22: 3-16 or Acts 9:1-22; Mark 16:15-18



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