

COLUMNISTS

Serbians anxious about church's role

Some of the best of reporting on a complex church-and-state issue that I have seen in a long time is Chris Hedges' article in Feb. 3 *The New York Times*, "Church's Role in Serbia May Block Reforms."

The leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church, once the ally of the Milosevic regime in Belgrade, has suddenly gone into the streets to march with those protesting Milosevic's nullification of local elections in which opposition parties won.

The local patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church had initially rebuffed efforts by university students to enlist church support for the protests when they began in November. But in January the patriarch addressed the protesters three different times, led a procession through the streets on a religious holiday, and blessed demonstrators on the Orthodox Christmas.

It sounds like Martin Luther King Jr. and the march to Selma all over again. Well, not quite. *The Times* reporter dug a little more deeply. He discovered that many in the opposition movement are actually alarmed, by the latest turn in the church's zig-zagging political course.

Unlike the spirit of solidarity among the faithful marchers of Selma, Ala., there is a gap between the religious leadership's agenda and that of the protesters.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

been the main repository of Serbian nationalism, Hedges points out, and it is hostile to secular, Western political systems and ideas. Critics fear that the church could co-opt the revolution and blunt the reforms that would be needed to usher in an open, democratic society.

During five centuries of Ottoman (Muslim) occupation and the last half-century of Communist rule, the Serbian Orthodox Church was the guardian of Serbian national identity. It was, Hedges writes, "the blunt ideological instrument that President Slobodan Milosevic wielded in his drive to wrest power from the Communist bosses 10 years ago."

The church aided the Bosnian Serb army in its brutal war against the Muslim-led government. Members of the clergy often traveled with the troops to bless them

and to meet with the Bosnian Serb leaders. Many in the hierarchy continue to support the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, indicted for war crimes.

Indeed, church leaders were silent when Bosnian Serb forces conducted their siege of Sarajevo in which many thousands of innocent civilians, including children, were killed or severely wounded and maimed. To this day the church claims that the only genocide in Bosnia was committed was by Muslims and Croats.

A former philosophy professor at Belgrade University insists that the "Orthodox church does not know the meaning of reform It calls on its followers to be collective, unified supplicants."

Its ideology, in fact, has more in common with authoritarian ideologies than with the mainstream Christian tradition, particularly as one finds it embodied in recent Catholic social thought.

"It was because of the Orthodox church," the professor continued, "that this society was easily convinced, that it had to become obedient followers of the Communist Party."

By welcoming the church now into the protest movement, the church runs the risk of becoming tethered to an institution that calls for a unified Serbian state that would include Serb-held Bosnia — in

violation of the Dayton peace accords.

The author of a just completed book on the Serbian Orthodox Church complimented the Roman Catholic Church for having recognized, at the Second Vatican Council, "the duty of believers to support democracy and human rights."

"But the church in the east," he sadly pointed out, "has never addressed these issues and found itself unprepared with the fall of communism."

"The Orthodox church," he concluded, "lacks a social doctrine. It is unable to deal with the next millennium."

Unlike the Orthodox churches of the east, the Catholic Church is blessed with a theologically rich and practical social doctrine. Nevertheless, some of its own local churches in central and eastern Europe, isolated for years from the positive impact of Vatican II and from the currents of post-conciliar Catholicism generally, have had their own problems of adjustment in the new post-communist world.

The top movement in Belgrade may well have something to learn from the healthy independence Polish Catholics have recently exhibited toward their own religious leaders.

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

Cast your vote, opinion, questions; e-mail welcome

As you know, space restraints have made this "monthly" column's appearance sporadic at best. But those of you with good memories may recall that late last year I talked with you about the introduction of four new columns: "Question Corner," by Father John Dietzen; "The Human Side," by Father Eugene Hemrick; "Ordinary Time," by Sister Mary Ann McGovern, SL; and "The Catholic Difference," by George Weigel.

I explained that we would present these four columns on a rotating basis for several months before deciding which one(s) to adopt on a permanent basis. Now that each column has appeared several times, I'd like to know what you think about them. Which one(s) have you found most interesting? Which are most readable? Which one(s) do you think best complete the columns we already carry?

Some of you may hope that we'll continue to carry more than one of these columns, and that is a possibility. In fact, if reader interest in the four is divided fairly evenly, we might even decide to continue the current rotation indefinitely. So your opinions will have a major impact. To cast your vote, you can write to me at P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624-0379 or send e-mail to me at RochCour@aol.com.



between the lines

By KAREN M. FRANZ

We will be discussing the columns at a meeting March 12, so your responses by then will be helpful.

I'll be looking forward to hearing from you.

Speaking of e-mail, some of you have noticed periodic references to the "On Our Move" pages. When we began testing on-line waters, we weren't sure how much e-mail we might receive from the general readership or how well we'd be able to respond to that volume. So we thought it would be good to start with a relatively small group and decided teens were the ideal segment because of computer literacy.

Since then, however, we've learned two things: that dealing with e-mail is less of

a chore than we feared (assuming we can get through to America Online!), and that most of the e-mail we've received has been from adults.

In the next few weeks, we'll be making a major announcement regarding other on-line endeavors. But for now, feel free to contact us by e-mail with anything from questions to letters to the editors. (We'd still prefer that you send calendar submissions by fax or mail — preferably by air — to ensure we get all the information we need.) E-mailed letters to the editor still need to include street addresses and phone numbers for verification purposes.

You may have noticed "house ads" appearing this month in promotion of Catholic Press Month, a national event sponsored by the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada. Those ads have focused on the importance of editorial content in the Catholic press, and especially in the *Catholic Courier*. I'd like to take a just few paragraphs here to discuss the importance of advertising content as well.

Some of the communication we've received from readers over the years indicates that some people consider ads in the

Catholic Courier as obstacles to their reading enjoyment. I've actually spoken with readers who advocated leaving out all the ads to make room for more stories.

Of course, I had to explain that "leaving out" the ads wouldn't make more room for stories — it would make less. That's because advertising revenues account for a significant portion of our annual budget. In effect, ads help pay the printing and mailing bills. If it weren't for ad revenues, we'd be forced to choose between drastically smaller papers or a major increase in the subscription rates we charge parishes and individuals.

In the coming weeks, our advertising director, Ray Frey, will address this issue with you further through house ads and mail. Meanwhile, I'd like to ask you to make a conscious effort in the ads that appear in the *Courier*. The businesses and organizations that place those ads are underwriting part of your subscription cost, and they deserve your attention. And, if you decide to patronize our advertisers, please make a point of telling them that you saw their ads in the *Courier*. Thanks!

Franz is general manager/editor of the Courier.

Lenten Dining Guide

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Dinner, Tues.-Thursday 4-9

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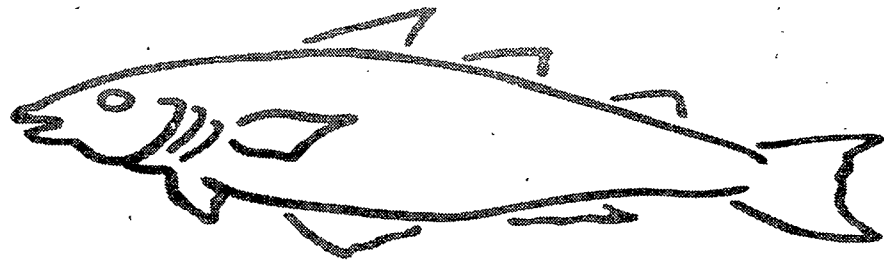


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