

# COLUMNISTS

## Theology remains essential, distinct

New or occasional readers of this weekly column are surprised to learn that it has been published for almost 31 years. It may be a matter of some minor interest that the very first column in the series was on the nature of theology (July 8, 1966). I pointed out to my earliest readers that St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) gave us the classic definition of theology: "faith seeking understanding."

Theology, I continued, is the scientific and systematic reflection of the church upon its faith. The chief aim of theology is understanding, not certitude. Theology gives us a greater understanding of what we already believe. Theology neither creates nor destroys faith.

The nature and purpose of theology remains as vital an issue today as it was 31 years ago. Many people continue to confuse theology with catechesis. Others view theology as a form of indoctrination. Still others see it as a ministerial or pastoral activity without any rigorously academic character.

Those who confuse theology with catechesis (literally, an "echoing" of the faith) misunderstand the distinctive roles of each.

Catechesis is for the young or new adult member of the church. It is intended to provide the first coherent sense of what the Christian life and tradition are all about. But more than the acquisition of



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

### essays in theology

knowledge, catechesis involves the awakening, nourishing, and forming of the young or new Christian's faith in the context of the faith community.

Theology, on the other hand, is for more experienced Christians, those who have been members of the church for some time and who have reached a level of intellectual maturity sufficient to address questions of faith in a critically scientific fashion.

Of course, there are degrees of readiness for theology. A first-year college student is less prepared for theology than a doctoral student. But the first-year college student who is not ready for theology is probably not ready for college either.

Those who confuse theology with indoctrination think the role of the theologian is to repeat, paraphrase, justify, and disseminate the official teachings of the

church as interpreted by the church's most conservative administrators, be they bishops, Vatican bureaucrats, or even the pope himself.

In this view, the theologian is like a press secretary. His or her task is to present, explain and defend the press releases, policy statements and corporate actions of the organization that pays the press secretary's salary. A press secretary who criticizes the organization's words and actions is soon out of a job.

Some Catholics think that should happen to theologians who on occasion disagree with, or cannot uncritically support, particular teachings or disciplinary initiatives of the hierarchy. But theologians are not press secretaries, and theology is not indoctrination.

Finally, there are others who confuse theology with ministerial or pastoral activity. To be sure, the work of the theologian can be, and often is, ministerial in character. And theology also has an inherently pastoral dimension since the faith it seeks to understand is always mediated, celebrated, nurtured and applied through and within the church.

Although theology does have a ministerial and pastoral dimension, it is always academic and scientific in character. Relatively few members of the church are qualified to be catechists. Fewer still are qualified to be theologians.

Which is not to say that catechists and theologians are better than the rest of the members of the church. Only that it requires a particular type of preparation and certification to function as either a catechist or a theologian.

One occasionally hears it said that a particular individual should have a place on a faculty of theology because he is a priest, or because he (or she) has many pastoral gifts, or because he (or she) is deeply committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a courageous and uncompromising way.

Those are excellent characteristics for a person under consideration for a ministerial or pastoral role in the church, but they do not, and cannot, supply for the academic competence required of a theologian seeking a faculty appointment in a college, university or seminary.

Who decides? As in any profession, only those in the field are competent to decide upon qualifications and/or suitability for a particular appointment.

Were that decision-making authority shifted away from the professionals, theology would become something other than theology (high level catechesis, indoctrination, a pastoral activity), and the church would lose an essential and irreplaceable element of its life.

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

## 'Thy rod and thy staff comfort me'

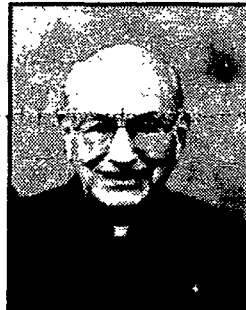
**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) John 10: 11-18. (R1) Acts 4:8-12. (R2) 1 John 3:1-2.

Next Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday. Twice in the Gospel, Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd."

In Greek, there are two words for "good": "agathos" and "kalos." "Agathos" describes a person or thing as competent, sound, all right. So, some parents name their girls Agatha. "Kalos" describes a person or thing that is not only good, but is beautiful, winsome, attractive and lovely. Thus the word h" kaleidoscope" means beautiful patterns; "calligraphy" means beautiful writing.

When Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd," he used the word "kalos." He wanted us to know that he is more than able and efficient; he is kind and loving. When we refer to a man as "a good doctor," we generally mean he is more than able; he is kind, understanding, gracious, with wonderful bedside manners. When Jesus is labeled "the good shepherd," the Gospel means that he is understanding, concerned, caring enough to seek out the lost sheep and bring them back to the fold.

He is a good shepherd for another reason: He cares so much for his sheep that he is willing to lay down his life for them. He does this freely. "I lay down my life of myself, no man takes it from me" — so great is his love for his sheep.



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

### a word for sunday

Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep. Sheep are such needy creatures. Sheep, for instance, have no sense of direction. Dogs and cats have built-in compasses. If they get lost, they find their way home again. Not so with sheep. If one gets lost, someone has to find it or it stays lost.

Sheep have poor eyesight. They cannot see 10 or 15 yards ahead. Not infrequently a sheep would step off a mountain path and hang helplessly on some ledge below. That was why the shepherd's staff was crooked: to get under the belly of the wayward sheep and hoist it back to the pathway.

Sheep, too, are pitifully helpless. They have no weapons of defense. Any other animal can prey on them at will. So in addition to his staff, the shepherd carries a rod: a heavy 2- or 3-foot club. David tells how he clubbed a lion to death to protect his sheep. The sheep instinctive-

ly is comforted by the shepherd's rod and staff. "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

Our Lord likened us to sheep. He did not mean to imply that we are totally helpless, bleating, smelly, wandering aimlessly, ready to be fleeced. No, he was referring to our supernatural destiny. In regard to that, man is helpless. He is no match for the devil; and the world and the flesh so tug at him that there is grave danger that he might wander off the right path. In matters of faith and moral, man needs the good shepherd of the church and her pastors. The Latin word for shepherd is "pastor." The "sheep" need good shepherds, "pastors."

One of the crises in the church in America is the dearth of vocations. God is calling our youth to the priesthood, but too often the call is being smothered.

For some, the world is too much with them. There are other reasons for our vocation shortage: the closing of our Catholic schools; the gibberish about celibacy and the ordination of women; the decline of family prayer and of families living the faith; and the movement to laicize the clergy and to clericalize the laity.

The good shepherd's call to priesthood can be answered by any youth who has the three H's: a good heart (good intention), a good head (average intelli-

gence) and good health (normal physical fitness).

To any such lad, I say: "Read about the priesthood, think about it, talk about it, pray about it; then do something about it! You have only one life to live, why not live it heroically?"

How many of our youth labor, sweat, grunt and groan for the nothings of this earthly life? All the while, the great glory of the priesthood, and heaven to boot, can be theirs at a nod.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, April 21**

Acts 11:1-8; John 10:1-10

**Tuesday, April 22**

Acts 11:19-26; John 10:22-30

**Wednesday, April 23**

Acts 12:24-13:5; John 12:44-50

**Thursday, April 24**

Acts 13:13-25; John 13:16-20

**Friday, April 25**

1 Peter 5:5-14; Mark 16:15-20

**Saturday, April 26**

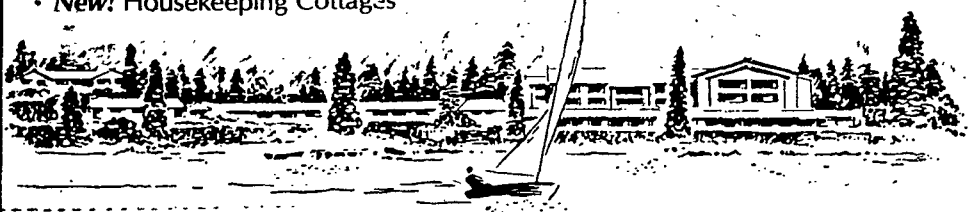
Acts 13:44-52; John 14:7-14

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