

COLUMNISTS

Catholics appreciate pastoral sensitivity

In all the years I have functioned as a theologian (37 and counting), no one has ever written to me after reading one of my books, articles or columns, or come up to me after a course or lecture, to inform me that I had motivated them to leave the Catholic Church.

On the contrary, I have had hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Catholics over these years tell me that what I wrote or said had given them hope and an incentive to remain in the church.

I must confess that I occasionally wonder if I have done the right thing in every case. So many good people remain in the church only to be ill-served by it — especially women whose own service to the church is the source of their livelihood.

There is still too much injustice in the church, particularly against its lay employees (directors of religious education, school teachers, newspaper editors and the like). People are fired, or their jobs threatened, because of opinions or behavior deemed unacceptable to the most rigidly conservative members of the hierarchy, clergy and laity.

For example, if any of our underpaid Catholic school teachers should find themselves in marital situations that befall virtually half the adult population, Catholics included, they face imminent danger of losing their jobs.

In a major East Coast archdiocese, a Catholic school teacher, esteemed by



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

colleagues and students alike, was recently terminated because she had entered into a second marriage in an Episcopal ceremony. Her pastor said it was the most difficult decision he ever had to make, but someone had secretly complained to the local bishop and the pastor was compelled to enforce the diocesan policy.

The canonical purists among us will insist that the pastor shouldn't have had any qualms. How can we offer as a model to our Catholic students teachers who are "living in sin" because they are divorced and remarried without benefit of an annulment (the term used today for a Catholic divorce)?

But if you were to ask the students themselves, the overwhelming majority of them would side with the divorced-and-remarried teacher over the diocese.

Students evaluate their teachers in personal, not legalistic, terms. Is the

teacher competent in the classroom? Does the teacher show real concern for the wellbeing of the students? Does the teacher manifest basic human and Christian values: justice, compassion, forgiveness, charity?

If a teacher fits this profile, students can't understand why that teacher can't be a good role model, even in a Catholic school. Why should the technical violation of a changeable church law take precedence over basic human and religious qualities?

Again, the canonical purists object. Being involved in a so-called bad marriage (that is, one without benefit of Catholic divorce, known euphemistically as an annulment) places one in a state of serious sin before God. In other words, the individual is objectively worthy of eternal damnation if she (or he) should die without repentance. (Appropriate repentance would require leaving the present partner or living in a so-called brother/sister arrangement.)

Again, most young people in our Catholic schools would regard this line of thinking as absurd. It only makes them feel even more alienated from the thinking that shapes some of the laws still on the church's books and the mind-set of some of its leaders.

Those laws and that mind-set conflict with the students' own experiences as members of families that include relatives or close friends in exactly the

same situation, that is, divorced and remarried, without benefit of canonical annulment.

Because these young people could never bring themselves to regard these relatives and friends as evil and, therefore, worthy of eternal damnation, neither could they regard them as poor role models. The students consider it not only senseless but also unjust when one of their teachers is fired under such circumstances.

The canonical purists may not like it, but that is the reality — and thousands of parish priests, sisters and ministerially engaged lay people also know it to be the reality.

A couple of years ago some of the German bishops, including the president of the German Bishops' Conference, had their knuckles rapped by the Vatican for suggesting that the church should reexamine its pastoral attitudes and practices regarding divorced-and-remarried Catholics.

Like so many members of the church, including many of our Catholic school students, the German bishops were looking at the situation from a pastoral point of view, rather than through the prism of canon law and diocesan policy statements.

It is that kind of pastorally sensitive church that is worth staying in.

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

Families give us our strength

Sunday's Reading: (R3) Mark 3:20-35. (R1) Genesis 3:9-15. (R2) 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1.

It is hard to believe, yet one of Hollywood's most handsome and athletic stars, Christopher Reeve, is now a quadriplegic. His most famous role, ironically, was Superman.

Reeve was asked, "During the stressful time after your accident, did you go through a major depression? Did you ever want to die or pull the plug?"

"No," Reeve answered. "Four days after the injury, I came to, and first realized my situation. My wife, Dana, and I were alone just before the operation that doctors said I might not pull through. I said to Dana, maybe it wasn't worth the trouble, maybe we should just let me go. Had she looked to the floor or paused, I would have thought she was being noble.

"But without missing a beat, she looked me right in the eye and said, 'But you're still you and I love you.' And that saved my life right there. That put an end to any thought of giving up. Then I thought of my three children. How could I possibly leave them? Through it all I never thought of suicide."

From where did Superman draw his strength? From his wife and children — his family.

Mark tells us that the family of Jesus came to take charge of him, saying, "He is out of his mind."

The crowd told him, "Your mother



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you."

Jesus, gazing at those seated around him, replied, "Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me."

First of all, we must not see this as a put-down of Mary, his mother. Jesus was saying there is a greater relationship than blood relationship. Mary was his flesh-and-blood mother, but she was more his mother because she fulfilled the will of God so perfectly. She conceived God first in her heart, then in her womb.

And secondly, Mary was ever-virgin; she had no other children, but only Jesus. The brothers and sisters Mark referred to were the cousins of Jesus, the children of Clopas, the brother of St. Joseph. Remember John's words, "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala" (Jn

19:25). "Mary's sister" meant her "sister-in-law." Sisters would never have the same name. The Hebrews designated all relatives as brothers and sisters.

Jesus' relatives were often a problem to him. Likewise our relatives and families have headaches and heartaches.

A father, fearing an earthquake near home, sent his two boys to stay with a distant friend until the peril was past. A few weeks later, the father received this letter from his friend, "Please take your boys home and send me the earthquake."

Children can be a problem. It's not easy to raise a family today.

One of the saddest occurrences of this past year was the murder of comedian Bill Cosby's son Ennis. Cosby's successful television program, "The Cosby Show," was a sitcom based on his own family.

Cosby, however, was not always committed to his family. In 1979, he told *Time* magazine that if he had to choose between his career and his family, he probably would have let his family go.

But something happened to change Cosby. He rededicated himself to his wife and children. "I just asked them to forgive me and ever since they've been a part of everything I do," he said.

Perhaps some parents need to make a rededication to their family.

Finally, good people make good parents. In his best-selling book *Straight Talk*, Lee Iacocca put it this way: "My father told me that the best way to teach is

by example. He certainly showed me what it took to be a good person and a good citizen. As the old joke has it, 'No one ever said on his deathbed, I should have spent more time on my business.' The bottom line I've worried about most was that my kids turn out all right. The only rock I know that stays steady ... is the family ... a civilized world can't remain civilized for long if its foundation is built on anything but the family."

Everything starts at home. Even Superman will tell you that.

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

Daily Readings

- Monday, June 9**
2 Corinthians 1:1-7; Matthew 5:1-12
- Tuesday, June 10**
2 Corinthians 1:18-22;
Matthew 5:13-16
- Wednesday, June 11**
Acts 11:21b-26, 13:1-3;
Matthew 5:17-19
- Thursday, June 12**
2 Corinthians 3:15, 4:1, 3-6;
Matthew 5:20-26
- Friday, June 13**
2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Matthew 5:27-32
- Saturday, June 14**
2 Corinthians 5:14-21;
Matthew 5:33-37

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