

COLUMNISTS

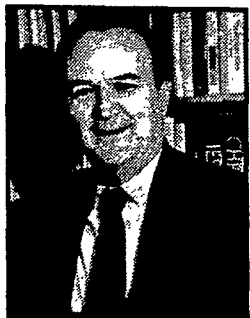
The vocation crisis is many-sided

The *National Catholic Reporter's* excellent special report on U.S. seminaries (9/12/97) prompts this week's reflection on candidates for the priesthood.

I should state at the outset my limited competence on this topic. Although I was a member of a seminary faculty for 10 years, I have not held a seminary faculty appointment for more than 20 years. On the other hand, I continue to have classroom contact with candidates for the priesthood at the University of Notre Dame. The seminarians (members of the Congregation of Holy Cross) reside at Moreau Seminary on campus and take theology courses at the university.

In the *NCR* report, I was intrigued by Sister Katarina Schuth's observation that over the past 10 years seminary teaching has improved, faculties are "better qualified," and students are older, "more settled" and "very moderate."

Sister Schuth, who teaches at St. Thomas Seminary School of Divinity in St. Paul, Minn., studies Catholic seminaries. Her opinions are not to be taken lightly. Those more skeptical about the state of seminaries today would want to see the evidence for such generalizations, and undoubtedly she will provide it when her most recent findings are published. To be sure, Sister Schuth also expresses con-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

cerns about seminaries and seminarians that have the effect perhaps of balancing off her positive generalizations.

She points out that some bishops and seminaries continue to accept "questionable candidates." The situation, in fact, must be widespread enough for the Vatican to have issued a warning last year against admitting candidates who have been expelled, or even voluntarily withdrawn, from religious communities and seminaries. Given the still declining numbers of seminarians in the United States, the temptation to lower the admissions bar is difficult to resist. Sister Schuth also expresses a concern about the apparent lack of historical depth some seminarians possess. All those under the age of 32 were born after Vatican II and even those between the ages of 40 and 45 have no re-

al memory of the pre-Vatican II Church and, therefore, no experiential basis for appreciating why the church felt the need for the reforms and renewal the council brought about.

Indeed, one is occasionally taken aback by seminarians and other Catholics under 45 who seem to pine for the "good old days" of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, when they have no lived experience of those days and, so, cannot credibly distinguish between the strengths and deficiencies of that period.

Sister Schuth worries that such seminarians may "lack the depth to grasp historical nuances and subtleties" and, as a consequence, may take "too simplistic an approach to religion" (these words appear in the article, but not as direct quotes from Sister Schuth herself).

Accordingly, she is concerned as well about the future of seminary education when such priests, lacking adequate historical formation and perspective, assume positions of leadership as rectors, administrators, and faculty members. To be sure, this is a particularly perilous time for the Catholic Church in the United States. On the one hand, there is a desperate need for priests and this is said without in any way denying either the absolute importance of lay ministries of every kind.

On the other hand, the candidate pool has not only become more shallow since the council; it has also changed dramatically, particularly after the 1971 World Synod of Bishops, which dashed any lingering hopes that the celibacy requirement for diocesan priests would ever be lifted in our lifetimes.

Thus, there now appears to be a proportionately larger number of gay seminarians, both those who are aware of their orientation and those who are not. The church has not yet come to terms with the long-term pastoral effects of this trend.

There are also increasing numbers of seminarian whose concept of Catholicism is at some variance with the renewal and reforms of Vatican II, especially in the area of liturgy and devotional life. Communion on the tongue, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and 1950s clerical dress, to take but three examples, are more than personal preferences. They are indicative of a mentality about the Eucharist, about the church as the People of God, and about the nature of the presbyteral ministry itself and its relation to the church's many lay ministries.

The so-called vocations crisis is many-sided.

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

True disciples pay the price

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 10:35-45. (R1) Isaiah 53:10-11. (R2) Hebrews 4:14-16.

One day James and John asked Jesus for the places of honor in his kingdom. Jesus asked them, "Can you drink the cup I shall drink?" They answered, "We can."

The first requisite to be with Christ is to be willing to pay the price, to drink the cup. All great achievers had to pay the price. When Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he had to lie flat on his back. Michelangelo had a "bad back." To lie on it long caused excruciating pain. Yet he lay on his back all day, every day, for 20 months. And he painted a masterpiece. That's how great things happen: total commitment, long, hard hours.

The second requisite to following Christ is to be able to make hard decisions.

Luciano Pavarotti was unsure when he



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

graduated from college whether he should be a teacher or a professional singer. His father said, "Luciano, if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair."

Pavarotti chose singing. It took seven more years before he made his first professional appearance. It took another seven years before he reached the Metropolitan Opera. But he had chosen his chair and he did not turn back.

In "Dante's Inferno," a group of lost souls sigh and moan as they whirl about aimlessly in the air. These "wretched people" are termed by Dante the "nearly soulless." On earth they were neither good nor evil. Now they hang suspended forever between a heaven that will not accept them and a hell that despises them. Not even their names were to be mentioned ever again. "Look," the guide said, "and pass on."

God said to the people of Israel, "I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life." Many of us have deluded ourselves into believing we can achieve our dreams without making hard decisions. Yet the ability to choose is how we best image God.

A third and final requisite to be with Jesus is the willingness to give more than to receive. A monk once found a precious stone. One day he met a traveler. As the monk opened his bag to share his provi-

sions with the traveler, the traveler saw the jewel. He asked the monk to give it to him. The monk did so readily.

The traveler departed, overjoyed with the unexpected gift of the precious stone. A few days later, though, he came back in search of the monk. He found him, gave him back the stone, and made a request. "Please give me something much more precious than this stone," he said, "valuable as it is. Please give me that which enabled you to give the stone to me."

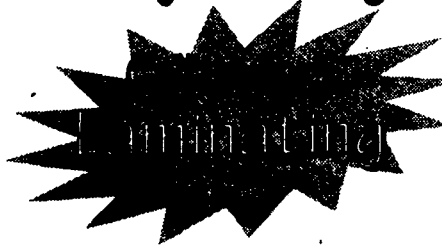
The ability to give is greater than the ability to get. The true followers of Christ give more than they receive.

Are we willing to drink the cup? In God's eyes these are the true disciples of the Lord. Whether they sit at the right or left hand of Jesus is not most important. What is important is that they are most certainly with Jesus.

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

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