

Laity document fails to mention injustices

In his *New York Times* column Dec. 13, Peter Steinfels offered some reflections on the recent Vatican document on lay ministers.

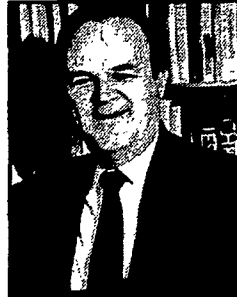
"Unlike candidates for the priesthood," he wrote, "most lay people committed to a career of church work must pursue their theological and pastoral education at their own expense and with a minimum of future job security."

The words, "with a minimum of future job security," are key, because what is perhaps most disquieting about the document is the lack of any reference to the injustices that many lay ministers suffer at the hands of the very church they serve.

If a priest or religious sister loses a job, their diocese or religious community finds them another. Lay people are another story. For them, church employment is not only a ministry but a livelihood. If they have dependents, the issues of salary, health benefits and job security are even more urgent.

And yet how many times does a lay minister find himself or herself at the mercy of what can only be described as administrative caprice?

A new pastor or principal ousts a lay minister or teacher from her or his position, without any reference to job performance; indeed, often in the teeth of positive evaluations.



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

When parishioners or fellow teachers raise questions about the dismissal, the answer is often, "The reasons are personal and confidential."

No "explanation" is more perverse than that one. People are invited to fill in the blanks, to imagine any reason that would justify such a drastic action and then to choose that as the answer.

Where internal efforts to resolve the problem fail, the discharged church employee is frequently left with only two unpleasant options: to move to another diocese (because if the separation has been particularly contentious, the chances of employment in the original diocese are slim to nonexistent), or to leave ministry for a job in the private or public sector.

Only a handful of victims of church injustice have a third option, namely, legal action. That option, however, can only be

taken with the greatest measure of caution. Not only is it extremely expensive; it is also psychologically draining.

As in rape cases, the victim is often recast as the evil one. The lay minister or teacher is threatened with a countersuit and her supporters are attacked, as if they had conspired to arrange the firing in order to have an excuse for making trouble for the pastor or the principal, or even the bishop.

We have seen this ugly pattern repeated many times over in the church's response to accusations of homosexual misconduct by priests. The young victim's parents are subjected to humiliating questions about their own sexual behavior, and the young man himself is portrayed as the seducer of a poor, innocent priest.

It has taken costly out-of-court settlements and spectacular jury verdicts to change the church's behavior in this area.

Unfortunately, church officials have too often allowed defense attorneys rather than their own pastoral hearts to dictate the manner in which they respond to allegations of injustice or misconduct.

For the most part, defense attorneys have but one goal: to get their clients off the hook, whether they're guilty or not. Truth and justice seem to have little or nothing to do with it.

So they will hide behind the First

Amendment, crying "separation of church and state." They may claim that contracts with the church are unenforceable in civil courts, even though most church employees who sign them assume they are enforceable.

Or they may even define, for purposes of legal argument, lay religious educators and liturgy directors as "clergy," because there are court precedents against intervening in disputes involving real clergy.

The outstanding exception to this whole scandalous pattern was provided by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. In face of the vilest of accusations against his own moral character, Cardinal Bernardin listened first to his own pastoral heart.

Not only did he speak openly and humbly about his life in the course of a dramatic press conference, but he also responded to his accuser with extraordinary, even heroic, charity. He did not attack him; he embraced him and eventually forgave him.

For too many others, however, stonewalling and counterattack seem to be the preferred method of response.

It is a response unworthy of a church that is called to teach and to act as Jesus did.

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

Scriptures have the power to change us

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21. (R1) Nehemiah 8:2-4, 5-6, 8-10. (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:12-30.

Vatican II in its document on divine revelation wrote: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord" (No. 21).

That's a startling statement, isn't it? The church is saying that she puts the word of God on a par with the holy Eucharist. In fact the liturgical reform of Vatican II had as its object to restore the inspired word of God to its rightful place in the liturgy. Thus the twin pylons on which the Mass is built are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

About 536 B.C., after the Babylonian Captivity, a remnant of the tribe of Judah returned to a burnt-out city of Jerusalem. Around 515 B.C. under the prodding of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the Temple was rebuilt. However, the Jewish community was struggling at the time. External enemies threatened it; poverty, discontent and religious apathy within weakened it. But about 445 B.C. Nehemiah came as governor and turned things around. He rebuilt the walls of the city and started religious reforms.

Then about 398 B.C. the scribe Ezra came, and brought with him the Scrip-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

tures, the Law and the religious authority needed to restructure the community.

Ezra propounded that the Scriptures were the inspired word of God and proposed them as the rule of life for the Jewish community. He did this on the feast of Tabernacles. This feast commemorated the time the Jews ancestors lived in tents (hence tabernacles) in the desert for 40 years after leaving Egypt. It was celebrated out of doors and was a kind of Mardi Gras time. Later, it was a time of rejoicing to celebrate the fall harvest. Then it became a time to read the Law and renew the covenant with God.

Ezra set the tone. On the feast of Tabernacles he stood on a platform so that all could see him. He opened the book of the

Law and people stood out of respect for God as the author of the words they were about to hear. From dawn till dusk the people listened.

When the people heard the Law, they wept. They wept because they realized that God had been with them always, whereas they had abandoned him. Their tears of repentance brought joy, and joy led to celebration. God's words always lead one to repentance, then to joy.

Leo Rosten in an essay on the power of words wrote: "They sing. The hurt. They teach. They sanctify. They were man's first immeasurable feat of magic. They liberated us from ignorance and our barbarous past ...

"And the men who truly shape our destiny, the giants who teach us, inspire us, lead us to deeds of immortality, are those who use words with clarity, grandeur and passion. Socrates, Lincoln, Churchill — Jesus!"

But words, in the mouth of God, inspired by him, reach their superlative power.

Once Jesus took bread and said, "Change" — and it did!

Once Jesus took wine and said, "Change" — and it did!

Once he gave the changed bread and

wine to his disciples and said, "Change" — form a new community, a new people, a joyful people of God. And they did!

The power of God's word — the Scriptures. Read it! Meditate on it. It will change you.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, January 26

2 Timothy 1:1-8 or Titus 1:1-5; Mark 3:22-30

Tuesday, January 27

2 Samuel 6:12-15, 17-19; Mark 3:31-35

Wednesday, January 28

2 Samuel 7:4-17; Mark 4:1-20

Thursday, January 29

2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29; Mark 4:21-25

Friday, January 30

2 Samuel 11:1-4, 5-10, 13-17; Mark 4:26-34

Saturday, January 31

2 Samuel 12:1-7, 10-17; Mark 4:35-41

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