

Austrian bishop criticizes Vatican document

It has been said that public dissatisfaction with the governing style of the current pontificate is peculiar to the United States. Anyone familiar with the European scene knows this to be untrue. Criticism of the Vatican is far more pronounced in Europe than in America, and just as likely to emanate from the hierarchy as from theologians or the laity.

A case in point: Just before retiring as bishop of Innsbruck (Austria), Reinhold Stecher released a letter critical of "the theological and pastoral deficiencies of the Church's present leadership." ("Challenge to the Church," *The Tablet*, December 20/27, 1997, pp. 1668-69.)

Although the occasion for Bishop Stecher's letter (which his successor also endorsed) was the recent Vatican document on lay ministries, the range of his concerns extend beyond that document.

The controversy over the role of lay ministers has been precipitated by the decline in vocations to the priesthood. For Bishop Stecher, "it is clear that as long as we continue to insist on willingness to live a life of consecrated celibacy, the number of priests will continue to decline."

However, because the church's leadership insists on the enforcement of "human regulations as though they were absolute," the church will continue to suffer.



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

"The decree on lay ministers," he writes, "is concerned entirely with defending the rights of the ordained. It shows no concern for the health of the community," which is dependent on the availability of the sacraments.

If we continue to insist that penance (reconciliation), anointing of the sick, and the Eucharist itself can be administered only by celibate priests, the faithful will increasingly be denied access to them.

The bishop criticizes the stopgap measure of having priests serve more than one parish at a time. In France, for example, there are "worn-out, exhausted priests" who are responsible for as many as 10 parishes.

For Bishop Stecher the "most shocking aspect of many church decisions" today is the attitude reflected in them. The ten-

dency is "to place human laws and traditions above our divine commission" to preach the Gospel and to make the sacraments available to the faithful.

Yet no one at "the highest level of the Church" seems disturbed that "literally hundreds of millions of Catholics are unable to come to the sacraments" and that, "because they cannot now come, in a generation they will not want to come."

"The most disturbing example, for me, of neglecting divine commands is our treatment of priests who have married." The bishop cites cases where married priests have had to wait for more than 10 years for an answer to their request for laicization, even though their own bishops strongly supported the petitions.

Such behavior, he notes, is contrary to the teaching and example of Jesus, for whom forgiveness and reconciliation are at the center of ministry. "Didn't he tell Peter that he must forgive not seven times a day but 70 times seven? This text never appears in Roman decrees, however, only 'Thou are Peter' of Matthew 16:18."

Should not Catholics who pride themselves on their loyalty to the pope, he asks, "tremble before the judge of all the world when a Pope dies with thousands of petitions and requests unanswered?"

"Doesn't our theology tell us clearly

that the refusal of forgiveness and reconciliation is a far worse sin than the violation of celibacy? ... Or do we suppose that the Church's juridical commands are exempt from Jesus' commands?"

"This is the real reason for the decline in papal authority," he writes. "This authority ... derives its force from agreement with Christ. ... History shows, however, that in practice even the Church's highest office-holder can stray from Christ."

"I know," Bishop Stecher observes, "that many priests and lay people who take their faith seriously suffer under these contradictions and long for a Pope for our times who will embody kindness before all else. As things now stand, Rome has lost the image of mercy and assumed the image of harsh authority."

"We cannot have a Church," he states, "in which those in the highest positions worry about every speck in the eyes of people in the local communities but not at all about the plank in their own."

Bishop Stecher's views are shared by many others in the church, including many of his brother bishops. Like him, they await a new leadership "more sensitive to the Gospel's real demands."

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

Prayer, Scriptures offer spiritual nourishment

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 6:17, 20-26. (R1) Jeremiah: 17:5-8. (2) 1 Corinthians 12:12, 16-20.

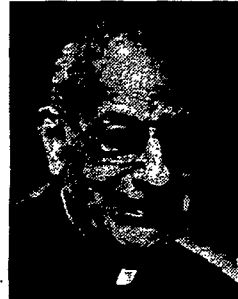
We all know the importance of eating a proper diet. "We are what we eat." Well, Jeremiah in the first reading talks about nourishment. He tells us that a person who trusts in man is like a shrub in the desert: He shrivels up and dies. But a person who trusts in God is like a tree planted by water: He is nourished, refreshed and fears neither drought nor heat.

The people to whom Jeremiah was speaking could relate to his message. There is little rainfall in Palestine. It is hot and dry, so in some areas only small, scrubby bushes survive. These shrubs seem to serve no purpose at all. They are looked on with disdain. However, every once in a while you will happen upon a tree in that generally barren land, a tall tree, a leafy tree, and you know that somewhere close by there is life-giving water.

The difference between a shrub and a tree, says Jeremiah, is nourishment. Where does a person of faith find nourishment?

One place is in the word of God.

Once a girl dreamt of a great open room filled with distraught and sorrowful people. The door opened and Jesus



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

stepped in. He turned to a man nearby and asked, "What is the matter, my child?"

The man said he had wasted his life in chasing after success. All his workaholicism left no time for a relationship with God.

"Didn't you get my letter?" Jesus asked. Astonished, the man said, "You wrote me a letter?"

"Yes," Jesus said. "I told you to seek first the Kingdom of God and all the things you need would be given you."

"Yes, I heard the priest say that," the man said, "but I didn't know it was for me."

A sobbing woman confessed that ever since her husband died she had spent her life fretting about the future.

"But, my child, didn't you read my letter?" Jesus asked.

"You wrote me a letter, Lord?" she said. "I did. I wrote: 'Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Do not be anxious about tomorrow.'"

"Yes," she replied, "the priest said that at my husband's funeral."

Jesus talked to each sorrowing person. In each case, he heard tales of turning away from God to pursue riches, ambition, lusts, pride. In every case, Jesus answered them with a letter meant just for them.

How sad to live like shrubs when nourishment is so close by in the word of God.

Another source of nourishment is prayer. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen used to tell us priests that if we did not have time for a Holy Hour each day, we didn't have time for anything else.

On June 2, 1960, an 8-year-old boy, Walter Sedor, was found sitting on a rock a mile from Torton Lake in Manitoba. For 15 days Walter waited beside the wrecked and burned plane in which his father, Steve Sedor, was instantly killed in a crash. Afraid and on the point of starvation, the boy waited alone for his mother to come for him.

Sadly, there was no need for the boy to be hungry, for thrown from the crashed plane was a survival kit containing 24

days' rations. The lad was unaware of what it contained.

Many people today are lost in the wilderness of doubt and fear and their souls suffer from malnutrition, hunger and starvation. And the sad thing is that help is so close.

Are we a dwarf shrub or a majestic tree? It all depends. Are we nourishing ourselves with daily Bible reading and daily prayer?

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

Daily Readings

- Monday, February 16
James 1:1-11; Mark 8:11-13
- Tuesday, February 17
James 1:12-18; Mark 8:14-21
- Wednesday, February 18
James 1:19-27; Mark 8:22-26
- Thursday, February 19
James 2:1-9; Mark 8:27-33
- Friday, February 20
James 2:14-24, 26; Mark 8:34-9:1
- Saturday, February 21
James 3:1-10; Mark 9:2-13

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