

# Church needs to admit it abused authority

We are about to begin another Lenten season, traditionally a time for taking spiritual stock of our lives, doing penance for our sins, and preparing for the Easter celebration of our baptismal rebirth in the Risen Christ.

The church itself must take spiritual stock of its communal and institutional life, do penance for its sins, and prepare for its own baptismal rebirth at Easter.

Taking stock, however, is a waste of time if it isn't honest. Unfortunately, honesty is not universally welcome in the church today. Too many want to hear (or read) only the good news: that the church is on the verge of a great institutional rebound, that vocations to the priesthood are rising in Asia and Africa and will eventually do so here as well, that there is a new devotional fervor in the land, that young priests are prayerful and loyal.

Many don't want to hear about problems: that millions of educated Catholics are in danger of becoming spiritually and intellectually disconnected from their tradition because many of those officially entrusted with its transmission seem either unwilling or unable to do so in a manner that respects their intelligence and lived experience, that women are increasingly alienated from the institutional church be-



## essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

cause too many of its leaders are tone-deaf regarding women's aspirations, gifts and frustrations, that the sacramental life of the church rests now on the fragile ground of a quantitatively and sometimes qualitatively inadequate presbyteral force.

No problem, however, is more serious than the leadership's apparent lack of trust in the Holy Spirit and in the faith and common sense of the laity at large.

This lack of trust is shown in some of the leadership's continued efforts to silence anyone who dares to offer a theological or pastoral viewpoint even marginally different from their own.

The viewpoints at issue are not at all matters pertaining to the core of Christian faith, for example, the divinity of Christ, the redemptive value of his cross and resurrection, the hope for eternal life.

They concern, for the most part, the manner in which authority is exercised in the church.

To be absolutely clear about it: What is at issue is not the very existence of church authority, but the way in which that authority is employed. And this is exactly the point that the pope himself made in his 1995 encyclical letter, *Ut Unum Sint* ("That they may be one"), where he clearly distinguished between the papal office as such and the manner in which papal authority is exercised. He invited criticism of the latter and suggestions for improvement.

The manner in which papal authority is exercised affects the type of men whom the Vatican elevates to the hierarchy or promotes within the hierarchy. It affects the manner in which the Vatican relates to local hierarchies, whether it respects their legitimate pastoral autonomy or tries instead to micromanage them.

It affects the refusal to grant requests for laicization of married priests, even when those applications have been endorsed by the priest's bishop.

It affects the decision to canonize one type of person (for example, the founder of Opus Dei) rather than others (for example, ordinary married persons who didn't happen to join a convent or found a re-

ligious order following the death of their spouse).

It affects the manner in which the Vatican reacts to theologians whose approach is different from its own, and yet entirely consistent with that of the great majority of Catholic theologians around the world.

"When ecclesiastical authority rattles the chains that come with monopolistic aspiration and forces confrontations with those who experiment within traditions, reinterpret scriptures, or stretch the bounds of community," Martin Marty, the distinguished church historian, has written (*Academe*, January/February 1998), "it may smugly satisfy itself.

"But in the eyes of many," he continued, "both academy and church then lose. The academy suffers because it loses the voice of potentially creative conversation partners. The church loses because it has had to coerce where it could not persuade, to punish where it could not trust, to expel and exile where it might have profited by listening."

To the extent that the official church has sinned in this regard, it needs to acknowledge its failings and resolve to change its pattern of behavior.

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

## Gospels present a faith portrait, not history

Q. Our parish Bible class is studying materials that refer to the "historical Jesus" as if he is different from the Jesus we know. Could you explain simply what the historical Jesus is?

(Ohio)

A. The "search for the historical Jesus" can help us understand some important elements of the church's teaching about the New Testament, the Gospels particularly.

For starters, your group must be aware of the Catholic teaching that the four Gospels were formed in three time periods or stages.

First came the personal ministry of Jesus himself, what he actually said and did, what concerns he had to deal with, what types of people he was trying to motivate and so on.

Second came the period of proclamation, when the apostles and other early disciples preached Jesus to the earliest Christian communities, roughly between 35 and 70 A.D.; how they reinterpreted the



## question corner

By FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

words and actions of Jesus in a variety of new cultures, new situations, new languages, all so the saving message, the "good news" of the risen Lord, would take root in new believers.

The final stage was the actual writing of the Gospels, a period covering roughly the years 65 to 100 A.D. During these years, "from the many things handed down," the Gospel writers "selected some things, reduced others to a synthesis, others they explicated as they kept in mind the situation of the churches."

Thus they compiled a narrative concerning the Lord Jesus "with a method suited to the peculiar purpose each (author) set for himself."

Their purpose, then, was not to compose a "biography" of the Savior, but to create a portrait of Jesus that would establish a base of faith in the risen Christ.

(This church teaching, including the above quote, is found in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels" 1964, and in other documents.)

It is important to emphasize here our Christian belief that all this happened under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit Jesus promised would be with his community of believers through the ages (Jn 14).

In no way, therefore, may we fear that the "truth" about Jesus and his message became diluted or confused by the time the Gospels were written.

On the contrary, the process leading up to their writing made the four Gospel por-

trays of Jesus clearer and infinitely more revealing than would have been possible (from our human perspective at least) had they been written the day after the resurrection.

From here on, the answer to your question is brief. The "historical Jesus" is the "actual" Jesus we might discover hidden behind the words and events of the present Gospels.

Scholars (with varying motives and degrees of faith) ask: If we dissect and search beneath the words of the Gospels, what "real" Jesus - what literal words and actions of Jesus as he walked this earth - might we uncover there?

Whatever that Jesus may be, however, he will never replace or detract from the Jesus we know and love by faith, the Jesus passed over to us by the Spirit, the Jesus of the Gospels.

Questions for this column should be sent to: Father John Dietzen, Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, IL 61701.

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