

COLUMNISTS

Cross-purposes marred Asian synod

Evangelization is a word that enjoys wide currency today at the church's highest levels. It was the theme selected by Pope John Paul II for the recent Synod for Asia, and is at the heart of Cardinal Francis George's pastoral agenda for the Chicago Archdiocese. The problem is that, while everyone agrees that the church's mission is to preach Christ and to carry out his mission of loving service to the world, it begs the question, "How?"

One doesn't simply wander into the slums of Calcutta and shout, "Jesus is your Lord and Savior!" Nor into the streets of Chicago for that matter.

The question, therefore, is not whether the church should evangelize, but how is it to proclaim Christ to a world that is so diverse — socially, economically, politically, culturally, and religiously?

Because many officials of the Roman Curia evidently fail to recognize that distinction, they and the Asian bishops found themselves speaking on two sharply different wavelengths at the recent synod in Rome. The bishops were asking for more autonomy in their pastoral work, while the curialists were seeking even more control, lest the bishops stray from the safe path of orthodoxy, especially in matters liturgical. The result was a synod with decidedly mixed results.

The very same issue had been raised more than 50 years ago by the renowned



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945 for his alleged involvement in the plot to kill Hitler. Several years later, Bonhoeffer's writings began to attract ever widening attention in the English-speaking world, especially with the publication of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* in 1953.

In 1962, Martin Marty, then on the way to becoming himself one of the nation's most distinguished church historians, observed that "in seminary halls, at student retreats, on college campuses, on the pages of ecumenical youth journals, in the fraternities of younger ministers few names must be conjured with so frequently as Bonhoeffer's."

Bonhoeffer's popularity continued to grow, thanks in large part to the publication in 1963 of Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson's best-seller, *Honest to God*, which included salient excerpts from the

Letters and Papers from Prison.

The ideas that were salted throughout those prison letters were later characterized by Bishop Robinson as having the power to "split rocks" in 20th-century theology. They shattered the complacency of conventional Christians and compelled them to re-think their understanding of Christianity, of Christ, of the church, and, indeed, of evangelization itself.

Bonhoeffer's letter of April 30, 1944, put the questions in their clearest form: How can Christ become the Lord even of those with no religion? What is the significance of a church in a religionless world?

Those questions were predicated on Bonhoeffer's conviction that the world of the 1940s was a radically changed world, partly as a result of the terrible forces unleashed by Hitler and the war and partly because humankind had become increasingly skeptical of what Bonhoeffer referred to as *deus ex machina* solutions to human problems. The world, he said, had "come of age," and religion, in the narrow, formalistic sense of the word, was in sharp decline. "We are proceeding," he wrote, "towards a time of no religion at all."

But Bonhoeffer was not suggesting that atheism and secularism were the wave of the future. He was criticizing a false notion of religion, and a false notion of Christ. His intention was not to debunk Christianity as such, but to retrieve and

restore it in a form that would be intelligible and attractive to this new, religionless "world-come of age."

Bonhoeffer's questions are as relevant today as they were in war-torn Germany, and nowhere is their relevance clearer than in the current discussion of evangelization and inculturation.

The questions that Bonhoeffer raised in a Nazi prison cell in 1944 are essentially the same questions that the Asian bishops raised at the synod: How can Christ be proclaimed to a society dominated by non-Christian religions and non-Western cultures? What is the role of a church that is but a tiny minority amidst those many religions and cultures?

Instead of trusting the bishops' pastoral judgment and welcoming their questions, however, the curialists did everything they could to suppress them and, failing that, to reshape them to fit their own theological agenda. They kept the synodal documents secret, prevented participants from receiving the texts of their fellow bishops' speeches, and even forbade them from taking notes during the proceedings.

With an approach like that, evangelization will never be more than a pious, but empty, word — in Rome, in Asia, and even in Chicago.

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

Concern for the dignity of all is central to our faith

The category of human need is one I seldom think about directly. I suppose many of us unconsciously refer to the needs of others often, but only rarely actually "focus" on it. Still, human need seems to have been a very important motivator in the life of Jesus. Not only do we find Jesus making some of his most troubling decisions because of his own response to human need, but many of the words and stories that we associate with Jesus address our own response to human need.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a good example of this kind of story. For those of us whose lives can seem to be dominated by attention to details of little consequence sometimes, we need only to be reminded that the holy book of "our people" includes this marvelous passage in which God is identified with the least among us.

And in the accounts of Jesus' life story, we hear of many decisions he made that upset the keepers of the law and customs of his day. Most often, these actions were in response to the human need that Jesus encountered in those around him.

Over the past few years, we have ourselves witnessed new importance given to the category of human need in Catholic social thought. The U.S. bishops include a remarkable passage in their 1986 letter



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

"Economic Justice for All": "The fundamental moral criterion for all decisions, policies, and institutions is this: they must be at the service of all people, especially the poor" (no. 24).

This remarkable passage is one of several coming from various church documents that seem to stand out when we first encounter them. They seem to cast everything in a new perspective and challenge our entire way of looking at things. I suppose our surprise at these passages highlighting human need as a central category for our view of the world is unnecessary. We seem to have had some hints along the way that might have alerted us to this "new" prominence that human need has gained. I remember, for example, that as a student I learned somewhere along the line that the great

moral theologian Bernard Häring had added an important new notion to the way justice should be most appropriately related to love.

Traditionally most moral theology has treated love as the foundation for all human relationships, with justice as a "secondary" aspect of love. But Häring wrote a sentence on page 471 of his work *Free and Faithful in Christ* that talks about the gradual achievement of the conditions necessary for us to achieve love. "While love is the foundation of justice," he wrote, "in a certain sense, the involvement of justice in creating happy human conditions precedes the work of love."

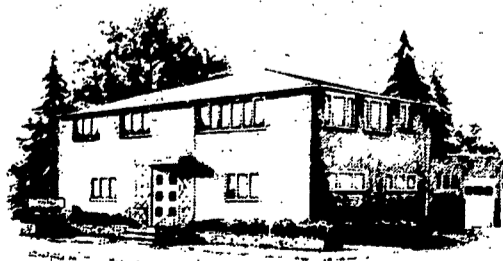
This is another strong, jarring sentence calling for a recasting of "business as usual." The works of justice, through which we address the important category of human need, can actually precede the achievement of love, and even make genuine love possible. No wonder Matthew 25 is so central a passage for Christians; no wonder so many of Jesus' deeds put the needs of human beings over even the religious customs of his time.

Even some documents that would appear to deal with topics only marginally related to questions of justice and human need refer to this phenomenon of Christian life. In their 1975 letter, "The Eu-

charist and the Hungers of the Human Family," the U.S. bishops wrote: "Participation in the struggle for freedom and justice is a duty for each one of us, as it is a central element of the Church's mission of redemption and liberation." (no. 12) Even right participation in the Eucharist, even redemption, is related to our response to those in need: There is no option when we are aware that human beings are in need.

My life may be like your own in the way I let a thousand petty concerns and efforts dominate what I do and what I think and care about. Even a brief "tour" of these few passages indicates that our commitment to discipleship ought to be urging us often to consider the question of how we are responding to the human needs that we know are unmet in the lives of others. An effort to work for the dignity of all people and to promote access to material and social goods among all people is tied to the very heart of the religion we proclaim. This is a duty related to our core Scripture, to church tradition, to the sacraments we celebrate, to the identity of the God we worship.

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