

COLUMNISTS

Church should focus on important issues

When the church turns its face toward the world, what does the world see? A furrowed brow, marked by an abiding and deep-seated concern for the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the sick and dying, the abused, the bereaved, the abandoned, those without hope, the victims of violence and war? Or a menacing scowl, etched by years of reproach and condemnation of people and practices perceived to be at odds with selected tenets of Christian morality?

Were an alien to land here from some distant galaxy, what impressions would that alien receive about the church? That it is primarily concerned with controlling people or with helping them? With sexual propriety or with justice? With rules or with relationships? With the small sinners who violate the conventional codes of sexual and reproductive behavior or with the big sinners who injure the weak and the vulnerable?

In recent weeks, the front page of the *New York Times* has featured a story (referred to in last week's column) about the cardinal-archbishop's denunciation, from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Cathedral, of a proposed city council law that would grant certain legal rights to same-sex couples. The ink was barely dry on that story when the Southern Baptist Convention came



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

roaring next to the front page of the *Times*, with a declaration that a wife should submit herself graciously to the leadership of her husband, who, in turn, is to provide for, protect and lead his family.

When challenged by their critics, church leaders of various denominations invariably appeal to revelation as the basis of their strictures. This is what God requires, they insist. There is nothing we can do about it, except to obey his word.

Many wonder, however, whether God has, in fact, ever had anything relevant to say about a city council ordinance granting certain legal rights to same-sex couples or about the specific living arrangements a husband and a wife might work out in their marriage. What is clear to many readers of the Bible is that the God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures seems to

have had many unambiguous and emphatic things to say about humanity's obligations to the poor and the powerless.

Few words are stronger or more pointed than these in the book of the prophet Amos: "Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine ... you who afflict the righteous ... and push aside the needy ..."

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of ... your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:11-12, 21-24).

One finds similar denunciations in the other prophets as well, especially Isaiah, Hosea and Micah.

At the beginning of his own public ministry, Jesus announced that he had been sent "to bring good news to the poor" and "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to

let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18-19).

His parables (for example, the laborers in the vineyard) reflected his sense of identification with the poor and with workers. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus first blesses the poor, insisting that the reign of God is theirs (6:20).

It is not that the poor alone are good and the rich are bad. What was revolutionary about Jesus' message in his time was that the poor should have any place at all in the divine plan of salvation. Indeed, the early church was unique in the Roman world as a religious movement springing from the poor and lower classes.

It is this same concern for the poor and the powerless that has inspired the centuries-long development of Catholic social teaching, and that has impelled Pope John Paul II to denounce social injustice and the great gaps between rich and poor peoples and nations during his many pastoral visits around the globe.

When the church focuses more on those concerns than on household codes and the social status of homosexuals, it shows a different face to the world's face that begins perhaps to resemble that of Jesus himself.

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

Don't abuse gift of freedom

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 10:1-12, 17-20. (R1) Isaiah 66:10-14. (R2) Galatians 6:14-18.

This weekend is Independence Day weekend. I know I speak for everyone when I say that we as a nation should thank God for our freedom. We ought not to take it for granted. Our Founding Fathers paid dearly to secure it for us.

Many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence suffered reprisals from the British. Most lost their fortunes as the British looted or destroyed their property and estates. Some had to flee their homes and go into hiding. Others further risked their lives on the battlefield.

Francis Hopkinson and his family had to flee from their home shortly before British soldiers came and destroyed it. John Witherspoon, president of what is now Princeton and teacher of James Madison, also had to flee his home which the British took and burned his precious library. John Hart had to leave the sickbed of his wife and go into hiding. When he returned his wife had died and his farm was destroyed. Abraham Clark's son was tortured and nearly starved to death because his father had signed the Declaration of Independence. Richard Stockton pledged "his life, his fortune, and his sa-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

cred honor" for liberty and became a martyr to this cause. No matter their trials, all stood firm for the cause of independence.

Freedom carries with it responsibilities. Freedom means we reap what we sow. Sow a good life and reap a good life. Sow an indulgent life and reap accordingly. It is our choice. Many people lose the things most precious to them because they cannot handle the gift of freedom.

In Auburn one of our landmarks is Harriet Tubman's house. She knew how precious freedom is. Her grandparents were kidnapped from Ghana in 1725 and sold into slavery. Harriet was the third generation in her family to live as a slave.

When it was rumored that she and her two brothers were to be sold to a chain gang, she decided to escape. She traveled

mostly by night and hid in fields and barns during the day. That this lone woman traveled to freedom was remarkable enough in itself. But the fact that she chose to return to slave country hundreds of times to lead others to freedom on the Underground Railroad is astounding. She risked re-capture, beatings, jail, even death to help others out of slavery.

Harriet kept going, risking her life to lead thousands of slaves to freedom. Once she said, "I freed thousands of slaves I could have freed thousands more, if they had known they were slaves."

Imagine! She could have freed thousands more, "if they had known they were slaves." There are people who are slaves and don't even know it: slaves to dangerous and disgusting habits, slaves to dehumanizing and degrading lifestyles, slaves to self-defeating attitudes and life-denying practices. We live in a society that thinks it can defy the laws of sowing and reaping, but it is an illusion. Want a healthy body, sow the seeds for a healthy body. Want to be holy, sow the seeds of sanctity. We can choose. Freedom means to choose.

One thing more about our freedom: It cost Christ his life. No wonder St. Paul could write: "May I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus

Christ! Through it, the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." The cost of freedom is high. For Harriet Tubman it meant dangers on the Underground Railroad. For Christ it meant death on Golgotha's hill. What does freedom mean to us? Does it mean a life of responsible living — a life lived in service to God and to others? Freedom is a precious gift, don't abuse it.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 6

Hosea 2:16, 17-18, 21-22; Matthew 9:18-26

Tuesday, July 7

Hosea 8:4-7, 11-13; Matthew 9:32-38

Wednesday, July 8

Hosea 10:1-3, 7-8, 12; Matthew 10:1-7

Thursday, July 9

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9; Matthew 10:7-15

Friday, July 10

Hosea 14:2-10; Matthew 10:16-23

Saturday, July 11

Isaiah 6:1-8; Matthew 10:24-33

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Kid's Answers from page 12

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses

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