

A call to practice, preach social teaching

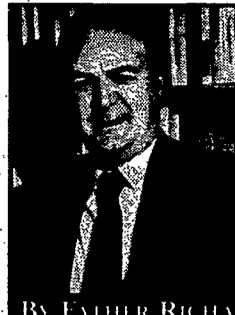
At their semi-annual national meeting in June, the U.S. Catholic bishops issued one of their most important statements of the post-Vatican II period, "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (*Origins*, July 2, 1998).

The bishops point out several times in the text that the church's social teaching is "a central and essential element of our faith," rooted in the preaching of the Hebrew prophets and in the teachings of Jesus himself (Lk 4:18; Mt 25:45). The church's proclamation of the Gospel is incomplete without it.

"If Catholic education and formation fails to communicate our social tradition," the bishops insist, "it is not fully Catholic." Indeed, "the sharing of our social tradition is a defining measure of Catholic education and formation."

In partial support of their position, the bishops cite Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on the coming new millennium: "A commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the jubilee."

Catholic social teaching, therefore, "must not be treated as tangential or optional.... Without (it), schools, catecheti-



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

cal programs and other formation programs would be offering an incomplete presentation of our Catholic tradition."

The immediate purpose of the bishops' statement is to urge Catholic educators at all levels "to incorporate more fully and explicitly Catholic social teaching in Catholic educational programs." The statement is addressed primarily to "principals, teachers, catechists, directors and coordinators of religious education, youth ministers, college and seminary professors, adult educators and social action leaders."

The bishops' sense of urgency grows out of their conviction that, despite the "significant and ongoing efforts" of many pastors and educators in the church, "our social heritage is unknown by many Catholics. Sadly, our social doc-

trine is not shared or taught in a consistent and comprehensive way in too many of our schools, seminaries, religious education programs, colleges and universities."

"Far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching," the bishops observe, nor do they "adequately understand" that it is "an essential part of Catholic faith."

Among the elements of Catholic social teaching that the bishops highlight are the "option for the poor," the right of workers to organize and join unions, and care for the environment. Contrary to the views of some politically conservative Catholics, "Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live." Accordingly, government has an important role "to protect human life and dignity and promote the common good."

The bishops neglect to point out, however, that the church itself must practice what it preaches and teaches about social justice and human rights. Indeed, it must be "exemplary."

By contrast, their 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy had made this unmistakably clear, drawing directly upon another remarkable church document,

"Justice in the World," promulgated by the Third World Synod of Bishops in 1971. That synodal document declared that a church that "ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. ... Within the Church rights must be preserved. No one should be deprived of their ordinary rights because they are associated with the Church in one way or another."

The theological basis for this teaching is the principle of sacramentality. The church is a sign as well as an instrument of the presence of God in Christ. As such, it must embody in its own internal life and practice the values it proclaims to the other institutions of society, especially governments and corporations. Justice is not divisible.

Perhaps the Common Ground Initiative might consider bringing together various sectors of the church to discuss specific ways of implementing Catholic social teaching. Progressive Catholics would be eager to do that, and, given their professed unqualified fidelity to the magisterium, conservative Catholics should be as well.

Just a thought for Labor Day, 1998.

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

Are you willing to take up your cross?

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 14:25-33. (R1) Wisdom 9:13-18. (R2) Philemon 9-10, 12-17.

President Harry Truman once made a trip to the old west town of Tombstone, Az. Ghosts of the famous and notorious alike crowd the streets of Tombstone. People like Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. When Truman returned from Tombstone, though, he didn't talk about the legendary heroes. Instead he recalled the words engraved on the headstone of a simple man buried at Boot Hill. The inscription read: "Here lies Jack Williams. He done all he could."

Crowds followed Jesus when he walked the earth, some out of mere curiosity, some as spectators. But Jesus wanted disciples, men and women who would do all they could in following him. He wanted people willing to put their lives on the line. People willing to turn their back on father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. Otherwise, "You cannot be my follower." Strong words!

Then Jesus went on: "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Jesus knew that some of the people had no idea of what they were getting in-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

to. They were caught up in his works of healing. They were fascinated by the interesting stories he told. They liked hearing him tweak the Pharisees from time to time. But they did not know what following him would one day entail. The words turning back on father and mother were disturbing, but Jesus knew that there would come a time when people would be disowned by their families because they followed him. They would lose their property, even their lives, for following him. Jesus wanted his followers to realize the cost of discipleship.

Sometime or another, we must make a decision about following Christ. We must decide whether we will be spectators or gladiators in the arena of his service, observers or doers, curious or

cross-bearers.

Franz Kafka in his novel, *The Trial*, tells of a man who had been instructed to enter a kingdom through a certain gate. He finds the gate, but notices a sentinel guarding the entrance. So he sits down and waits for the sentinel to give him instructions, or to grant permission to enter. The guard does nothing and says nothing. So the man continues to sit, waiting for something to happen. For a whole lifetime he sits. Finally the guard closes the door, and turns to the man.

"This door was made for you, and for you alone," he says. "And because you chose not to enter it, it is being closed forever."

Christ has opened the door to each of us. He has given us the opportunity to follow him. We can sit around and do nothing or we can follow Christ. Only we can make that choice.

Lucy O'Brien, a pioneer newspaper-woman in Florida, put it this way: "The most important question a person ever asks is, 'If I die today, what will my life have stood for?'"

Let us put that question to ourselves. "If we were to die today, what will our life have stood for?" To say "Yes" to Christ is to say "No" to many other things. But the

greatest danger is inaction. Only 12 men and a small number of women and men out of the thousands who ever heard Jesus teach said "Yes" to his call of discipleship. The rest decided the cost was too high. They were too comfortable the way they were. How about us? There is a door made just for each of us and each alone. Will we enter it today?

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

Daily Readings

- Monday, September 7**
1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Luke 6:6-11
- Tuesday, September 8**
Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30;
Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23 or 1:18-23
- Wednesday, September 9**
1 Corinthians 7:25-31; Luke 6:20-26
- Thursday, September 10**
1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 11-13;
Luke 6:27-38
- Friday, September 11**
1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27;
Luke 6:39-42
- Saturday, September 12**
1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Luke 6:43-49

Heart to Heart

Fr. Hugh Burns, O.P.

St. Jerome's Parish Mission
September 13-16

Evening Talks 7:30 p.m. (Sunday-Wednesday)
Mass & Homily 9:00 a.m. (Monday-Wednesday)

Some of the following topics will be covered:

What is Religion all About Anyway?
Suffering & Happiness, Forgive & Forget

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