

COLUMNISTS

Church benefits from contact with world

Before Vatican II, the church tended to look upon the world as something separate from itself. It saw its proper relationship to the world as twofold: either to avoid contact lest we become contaminated, or to engage it directly in order to transform it.

The former approach was in line with many important movements in the history of the church, as in some forms of monasticism. The latter approach was consistent with the various social action movements of the first half of the 20th century.

On the surface the two approaches seemed mutually opposed. What they had in common, however, was an essentially negative attitude to the world. For the former, the world is so sick (with sin) that one needs to keep as far away from it as possible. For the latter, the world is also sick, but the church has an obligation to help restore it to spiritual health.

The former approach is counter-cultural. The task of the church is to point out and deplore the errors and pitfalls in contemporary culture. The other approach is incarnational, or transformational. Like Christ, the church must take on the flesh of history and transform it through its own self-sacrificial service.

Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et*



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

spes) is closer in vision to the incarnational approach than to the counter-cultural, but without some of the negative overtones of the former. For the council, the church engages the world directly, not only because the world needs the church's assistance but also because the church has something to learn and benefit from the world.

The world is a morally mixed reality, just like the church itself. Therefore, the world is "capable of doing what is noble and what is base, disposed to freedom and slavery, progress and decline, amity and hatred" (n. 9).

In the end, however, there is more good than bad in the world. Indeed, "the Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world," and God is present to it "in the events, the needs, and the desires" which humanity

shares with the church (n. 11).

Not only does the church offer its assistance to the world, through the light and practice of the Gospel (nn. 41-43), but the church itself also receives something of value from the world.

The church profits, for example, from the science's progress and from "the riches hidden in various cultures" (n. 44). Consequently, the church becomes better able to express the Christian message in concepts and languages of different peoples, and to adapt it to the understanding of all, including those blessed with learning.

"Nowadays when things change so rapidly and thought patterns differ so widely," the council noted, "the Church needs to step up this exchange by calling upon the help of people who are living in the world, who are expert in its organizations and its forms of training, and who understand its mentality, in the case of believers and non-believers alike" (n. 44).

The council conceded that even the church's own structural organization can benefit from contact with the modern world and its cultures. Such contact can help the church "understand its constitution more deeply, express it better, and adapt it more successfully to our times" (n. 44). The same positive yet realistic approach was repeated in a later section en-

titled, "Harmony Between Culture and Christian Formation" (n. 62).

One of the strongest characteristics of the modern-world is its reverence for human freedom. Here again, the council adopted a position closer to that of the incarnationalists. "It is only in freedom," the council insisted, "that people can turn themselves towards what is good" (n. 17).

Even if such freedom is often abused, "genuine freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in humanity." Indeed, human dignity requires that we always "act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by our own blind impulses or by external constraint" (n. 17).

Without freedom for its own members, the church cannot effectively fulfill its mission in and for the world. "For the proper exercise of this role," the council declared, "the faithful, both clerical and lay, should be accorded a lawful freedom of inquiry, of thought, and of expression, tempered by humility and courage in whatever branch of study they have specialized" (n. 62).

The threat of punishment by a "just penalty" was not exactly what the council had in mind.

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

Bank on the Lord's generosity

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 16:1-13. (R1) Amos 8:4-7. (R2) 1 Timothy 2:1-8.

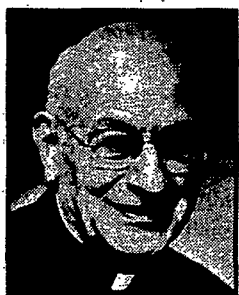
Jesus told a humorous parable about a wealthy man who had a shrewd, clever manager working for him. The manager was dissipating the wealthy man's property. So the master called him in on the carpet and said, "Get your books in order. You're fired!"

The manager was panic stricken. He couldn't dig or beg. So he called in his master's debtors and reduced their bills.

Why did Jesus make a hero of this man? He was a knave, a scoundrel. It was the man's ingenuity and drive that Jesus was extolling. The man didn't sit around whining. He got busy and found a solution. He was an industrious scoundrel. Jesus was a man of action who wanted his followers to be people of action.

Years ago Charles Spurgeon was commenting on this verse from the book of Job: "A messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were plowing and the asses feeding beside them'" (1:14).

Spurgeon lifted up his eyes with a kindly glance around the crowded gallery and said, "Yes, that is still the case. Some of us are always plowing, breaking up the fallow ground, preparing it for good seed. And



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

others are feeding."

Then he looked his congregation in the eye and said, "I know some of you, dear people, would never miss a Sunday service. You feed, always feed. It is good to feed, it is necessary to feed, but you should do a bit of gospel plowing as well. The oxen were plowing, but the asses were feeding!"

Jesus was frustrated by people who were nice but never did one thing to advance the kingdom of God.

However, there is another way of looking at this parable. The master seems to be a rather caring gentleman. He could have had his manager arrested. But he didn't. He kept the matter quiet so that the manager could bow out gracefully. All the master's debtors had no idea that the man-

er has been canned. So he goes to them and reduces all their bills.

Good news spreads fast. The master fears of this. He becomes quite a hero. In fact all the debtors flock to his door to voice their thanks. What a generous man!

Now the master could have denounced his manager and revoked all the cuts on their bills, or he could have kept quiet and let things stand as they were. If he did the first, he would have lost face. To take away the blessings they had received would make him look stingy, greedy and more concerned about his wealth than about people. Whereas the manager would have come out smelling like roses.

If, however, the master let things stand, the people of the community would praise his generosity. His manager standing at his side would grin at the success of his scheme. The master would slap him on the shoulder, laughing at the good joke that's been played. The manager would gain a lot of friends and the master would have risen in the esteem of the community. Everyone would feel good and the whole town would celebrate.

What would be the moral to this interpretation of the parable? Jesus is not telling his followers to be dishonest. No, the one idea on which everything hinges

is the generosity of the master. So, Jesus would be teaching about the great generosity of God the Father. Are we making full use of it? As the manager hoped to survive by making use of the generosity of his master, so we can hope to survive the pressures of life by banking on the generosity of God the Father. From his infinite riches, God gives and gives and gives.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, September 21

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13;
Matthew 9:9-13

Tuesday, September 22

Proverbs 21:1-6, 10-13;
Luke 8:19-21

Wednesday, September 23

Proverbs 30:5-9; Luke 9:1-6

Thursday, September 24

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11; Luke 9:7-9

Friday, September 25

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Luke 9:18-22

Saturday, September 26

Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8;

Luke 9:43-45



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