

Apostolic letter is about politics, power

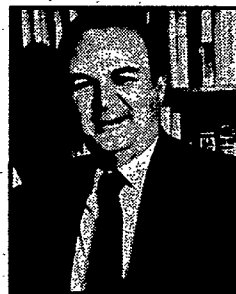
Some Catholics express great discomfort when political categories are introduced into any discussion of ecclesiastical life. For such Catholics, there can be no distinction within the church between liberals and conservatives.

Their underlying concern is that the use of such terminology tends to legitimize the differences that exist on doctrinal and disciplinary matters, not only among the Catholic rank-and-file, but also between the rank-and-file and the hierarchy. In their minds, the only valid distinction is between orthodox Catholics and dissident Catholics, or simply faithful and unfaithful Catholics.

While the concern about orthodoxy and fidelity is understandable, the denial of the political nature of many church issues is not.

Politics is primarily about power. It is the art and science of gaining, exercising and retaining power. Accordingly, political terms like liberal and conservative are applied to Catholics and organizations, to identify and contrast differing attitudes toward the conferral and use of power in the church.

Liberal Catholics may readily accept the creeds and other symbols of faith, but many of them have a problem with the way in which power is transmitted



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

and exercised in the church. Conservative Catholics, on the other hand, tend to be satisfied with the present system of conferring and exercising power in the church. The more fundamentalist actually believe it to be constructed and put into place by the Lord himself.

The late New Testament scholar, Father Raymond Brown, referred to this as the "ecclesiastical blueprint" approach. He made clear that such an approach has no basis in Scripture.

A case in point: The discussion of Pope John Paul II's recent apostolic letter severely restricting the teaching authority of national episcopal conferences has been largely theological and canonical. By way of example, Father Joseph Komonchak, of The Catholic University of America, offers a helpful commentary

in the Sept. 12 *America* magazine.

But there is also a sheerly political dimension to this issue.

We do not have here simply a theological difference over the nature of collegiality, or the sacramental character of the episcopal office, or the teaching authority of episcopal conferences.

Much of the substance of the recent apostolic letter has implicitly to do with power: who governs the church, who sets policy for the church, who determines and enforces the church's rules and regulations; who appoints people to high ecclesiastical positions, and who promotes them to even higher positions.

Ever since the council adjourned in 1965, Vatican officials have been trying to regain the enormous power they had lost at Vatican II. The concept of the monarchical church, with the pope at the top of a pyramid, aided by the Roman Curia, was set aside in favor of a collegial church, in which all bishops, not just those working in the Vatican, collaborate with the Bishop of Rome in governance of the universal church.

The verb is crucial. The bishops do not simply "cooperate" with the pope, carrying out his orders. They truly "collaborate" with him because they, like him, are bishops, with pastoral responsi-

bility for the universal church.

Also, the council restored the local church, or diocese, to its rightful dignity as the Body of Christ in a particular place. The local church is not merely an administrative sub-division of the universal church.

Bishops, the council insisted, are not vicars or agents of the pope. They are pastoral leaders in their own right, with responsibilities not only for their own dioceses and for the universal church but also for their own regions and countries.

Historically, through synods and regional councils, bishops fulfilled their responsibilities toward the church of their region. Episcopal conferences, formed with Vatican II's encouragement, are the newer vehicles through which bishops fulfill national pastoral responsibilities.

When such intermediate bodies take their pastoral responsibilities seriously, they inevitably diminish the power not only of individual bishops but also of the Vatican itself. That is why the recent apostolic letter on national episcopal conferences was as much a political document as it was theological and canonical.

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

Faith grows by living it

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 7:5-10. (R1) Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4. (R2) 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14.

We've all have been at a Barnum & Bailey circus. Under the big top we laughed at the clowns, watched lions and tigers jump at the crack of a whip, and gazed in awe at acrobats performing high above us in what seemed like death-defying feats. So marvelous were their feats that the audience came to believe that they could do almost anything.

Then the ringmaster addressed the crowd: "Ladies and Gentlemen, do you believe that one of these daring acrobats can ride safely over the high wire on his bicycle carrying someone on his shoulders?" Practically everyone showed they believed by raising their hands. "Very well," said the ringmaster, "now, who would like to be the first to volunteer to sit on his shoulders?"

They believed and yet they stayed in their seats.

The disciples had been following Jesus for some time. They experienced his teachings firsthand, were present at his healings and witnessed his confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees. Yet the disciples were trying their best to understand Jesus and what he expected.



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

It wasn't easy being a disciple of Jesus. They had left jobs, family and friends. At times they were frustrated. Watching him teach and perform miracles, they thought they could never do that. So out of a sense of inadequacy, the Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

It seemed like a reasonable request. Maybe if they had more faith, they would not feel so frustrated or inadequate. Jesus replied that it wasn't a lack of faith that was the problem. He answered: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this sycamore, 'Be uprooted and transplanted into the sea,' and it would obey you."

The mustard seed is one of the smallest of seeds. It looked like a speck on the tip of one's finger. Jesus implied that

even a small amount of faith is enough to do the seemingly impossible. Jesus was not reprimanding his Apostles.

Their problem was not a lack of faith. I Actually, we all have more faith than we think. If we have ever turned on a light switch, filled our car with gas, mailed a letter, flown in an airplane, or ridden in an elevator, believe me, we have faith. Jesus knew the Apostles' problem wasn't lack of faith. It's that dread disease, "paralysis by analysis." Waiting around until we have more faith.

In World War II French prisoners were forced to work in a German munitions factory. Upon realizing that the very bombs they were building were being used to destroy their beloved homeland, they made the decision to create a malfunction in the devices that detonate the bombs. With the changes that the prisoners made, the bombs did not explode on impact, they were harmless. Puzzled by so many failed attacks, the French government conducted an investigation. Upon opening the bombs, they found slips of paper inside bearing these words: "We are doing the best we can with what we've got, where we are, every chance we get."

We pray for more faith, but God wants

us to get into action using the faith we already have. God wants us to just do the best we can with what we've got, where we are, every chance we get.

We already have all the faith we need to perform miracles. All we have to do is to start living our faith. Living it will increase it.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, October 5

Galatians 1:6-12; Luke 10:25-37

Tuesday, October 6

Galatians 1:13-24; Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday, October 7

Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14; Luke 11:1-4

Thursday, October 8

Galatians 3:1-5; Luke 11:5-13

Friday, October 9

Galatians 3:7-14; Luke 11:15-26

Saturday, October 10

Galatians 3:22-29; Luke 11:27-28

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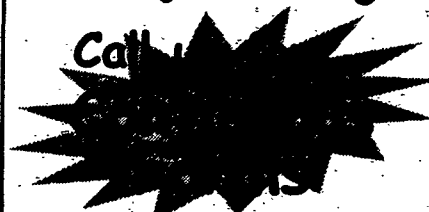
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