

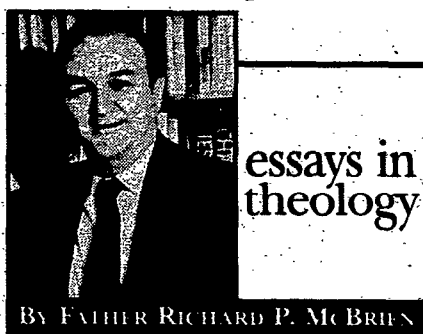
# Church in danger of losing young adults

*Commonweal* magazine published an important article in its July 17 issue on the institutional allegiance of young adult Catholics in the United States, "Faith Loosely Held."

Based on a recent survey of some 700 Catholics between the ages of 20 and 39 (a group constituting nearly 40 percent of America's 60 million Catholics), the authors conclude that the Catholic identity of young adults is rooted in the sacramental life of the church, in service to the poor and in devotion to Mary. Institutional concerns, such as rules governing ordination to the priesthood or moral disputes about birth control, lag far behind.

No close observer of the Catholic scene will be surprised by the first item. At a time when so many Catholics are alienated from the present leadership of their church and from the various rules and regulations they seek to enforce or newly impose, there is no widespread desire on their part to leave the church.

What holds such Catholics, including those in the 20-39 age bracket? The sacramental life of the church. For them, to leave the church is to leave behind the weekly celebration of the Eucharist and reception of Communion, the baptism of their children, the celebration of their



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

children's spiritual coming of age in confirmation, the sacramental marriage of their sons and daughters, the care of their sick and dying loved ones, the forgiveness of sins.

The authors question whether this "sacramental imagination," as some theologians call it, will last for very long, because a vibrant sacramental life needs an institutional context in which to exist and flourish. But there are strong and pervasive cultural influences working against religious institutions nowadays.

"Indeed," the authors point out, "the culture seems to regard organized religion as harmful to the spiritual quest because of organized religion's penchant for control, dogmatism, and authoritarian rigidity. Young adult Catholics are not immune to such influences." Their cur-

rent attachment to the church does not mean that they are all regular churchgoers. Many are not. They attend Mass only occasionally. The authors suggest that a "high holy day" syndrome, common among many American Jews, may be developing among young adult Catholics. Their Catholic identity and practice seem to come in the form of "sporadic sacramental ritualization" of key moments and events in their lives.

What the article has to say about these young adults' second mark of Catholic identity, namely, service to the poor, is more interesting, perhaps because it is less predictable.

The authors credit 30 years of post-Vatican II religious education for heightening our consciousness regarding the role of the church in the world, and particularly the belief that "God is present in a special way in the poor." However, young adult Catholics generally view service to the poor in personal rather than societal terms.

"It appears," the authors write, "that young Catholic laity are more influenced by the individual ethos of practicing 'charity' than by calls for structural analysis of social change." Thus, the church's longstanding teaching in support of labor unions falls at the bottom of the sur-

vey's list of 19 possible markers of Catholic identity.

The authors wisely suggest that the church "would do well to provide greater opportunities for service initiatives and a grounding in social-justice teachings, both as a means of fulfilling its public ministry and as a means of linking the young to its institutional life."

The third item, devotion to Mary, will also be surprising to many. But this is not difficult to understand. Thousands of churches are named in her honor. Statues of her abound. She remains a central, unifying force in many ethnic communities. Pope John Paul II's "unabashed Marian piety" and the proliferation of reports of Marian apparitions also keep her before the public eye.

On the other hand, the weakening of young adult Catholics' institutional sense "has long-term implications for priestly vocations, lay ministry, the development and enhancement of spirituality outside parish communities, and the church's authority as a public witness."

Although the church cannot afford to ignore this warning, history teaches that it too often does just that.

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

## Express gratitude for the gift of life

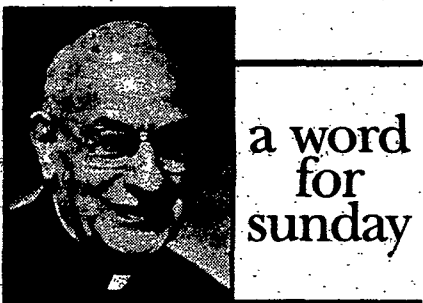
**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Luke 17:11-19. (R1) 2 Kings 5:14-17. (R2) 2 Timothy 2:8-13.

Jesus was traveling near the border between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem when 10 lepers met him.

Right away we know we are in for an interesting story because Jews and Samaritans had been feuding for centuries. When Jesus, a Jew, was on his way to Jerusalem, the Samaritans refused him shelter (Luke 9). James and John asked him to command fire to come down from heaven and consume these Samaritans. Jesus chewed them out and made a hated Samaritan the hero of his parable about the Good Samaritan.

In Sunday's Gospel about the 10 lepers, Jesus again makes a Samaritan the hero. Our Bible calls them lepers, but a better translation would be "men with leprosy." Our Bible speaks of the Gerasene demoniac, a better translation would be "a man with a demon"; the same with the word "paralytic," a better translation would be "a man with paralysis." Subtle distinctions? Sure, but in these translations, the focus is on the personhood of the one afflicted rather than on the affliction itself. That's the spirit of Jesus.

Leviticus 13:45-46 proscribes the life of



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a person with leprosy. "The person who has the leprosy disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled, and he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." Can we not sense the agony of such a life?

When the 10 men with leprosy approached Jesus, but they didn't cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" Instead, they call out, "Jesus, Master." They see our Lord for who he is, "Jesus, Master!"

Jesus sees them, has compassion on them and heals them. They're happy, but only one of them, a Samaritan, comes back and thanks Jesus. Jesus cannot miss the irony, and so he says the words on which the story turns, "Were not all ten made whole? Where are the other nine?"

Was there no one to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?"

What strikes us as ironic is that as soon as nine of these men are healed, they become like everybody else. Once they called Jesus "Master," now they forget him. Once they cried for help. When they got it only one gave thanks. It's not a lesson in good manners, but a lesson in gratitude.

In a movie there was a scene where a farmer returned thanks by saying, "Lord, we tilled the ground, we planted the seeds, we did the fertilizing, we harvested the crops, we ground the grain, we kneaded the dough, we baked the bread, but we thank you just the same." That's not thankfulness. True thanksgiving is an affirmation of life, to see all life as a gift of God.

Remember the hymn: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise him all creatures here below ..." As followers of Jesus, we need to view all life with gratitude. Paul Tournier wrote: "The farmer sows his wheat in the gray days of autumn. He knows in the springtime his field will be green with thousands of little shoots and that in the summer it will turn to the gold of harvest. Faith consists in the recognition that it is God who makes the grass grow and in loving and glorifying Him in thanksgiving. Impiety consists in deriding

God, while, at the same time, counting upon having bread next year."

People of faith are smart enough to "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

A farmer went to town for a little breakfast. Before his meal, he bowed his head and offered a silent prayer. The man at the next table mocked him saying, "Hey, does everybody do that where you come from?" "No," said the farmer. "The pigs don't."

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

### Daily Readings

- Monday, October 12**  
Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1;  
Luke 11:29-32
- Tuesday, October 13**  
Galatians 5:1-6; Luke 11:37-41
- Wednesday, October 14**  
Galatians 5:18-25; Luke 11:42-46
- Thursday, October 15**  
Ephesians 1:1-10; Luke 11:47-54
- Friday, October 16**  
Ephesians 1:11-14; Luke 12:1-7
- Saturday, October 17**  
Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 12:8-12

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