

Theology vs. culture comment provokes probe

Pope John Paul II has called a halt to discussions about the ordination of women to the priesthood, but those discussions continue stimulated in part by the hierarchy itself. Every time the hierarchy issues a statement defending the current policy of the church, it provokes responses from those who disagree with the supporting arguments.

An American cardinal took issue recently with a local columnist in a diocesan paper, insisting that "All the arguments supporting the church's teaching are theological; all of the arguments against it are primarily cultural." Such a claim invites a response.

Subsequently, the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops authorized the release of a statement prepared by its Committee on Doctrine, "Ten Frequently Asked Questions About the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men" (Origins, 10/29/98). Its arguments, too, are subject to question.

For example, it makes a leap from the belief that "the sacraments are entirely the gift of Christ to the church" to the assumption that Christ directly instituted each of the seven sacraments, and, more, that he determined the essential details of their proper celebration. No Catholic biblical scholar or sacramental theologian would or could support such a claim.



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

The statement also assumes that every Apostle was a priest. Therefore, because Jesus chose only men to constitute the Twelve, he also chose only men for the ordained priesthood. But there is no direct evidence in the New Testament that he chose anyone to be ordained priests in our present understanding of that ministry.

In Jesus' time there was no idea of a Christian priesthood separate from the Jewish priesthood. Nor is there any explicit evidence that the Last Supper included an ordination ceremony or that all of the Twelve subsequently functioned as priests. (This is not to say that the Apostles did not do so.)

The committee document also asserts without qualification that "the sacrament of holy orders ... has always been reserved to men...." But the diaconate is an integral part of that sacrament and there is some

evidence that women served as deaconesses in the early church (see 1 Timothy 3:8-13; and Romans 16:1, where Phoebe seems identified as a deacon).

The ministry of deaconesses continued in the East until the 11th century and in the West until the sixth. The Council of Chalcedon (451) spoke explicitly of their ordination: "No woman under forty years of age is to be ordained a deacon, and then only after close scrutiny."

The doctrinal committee's statement appeals, finally, to the existence of "considerable biblical evidence that indicates that the pastoral leadership of the church from the beginning was male." The same evidence also indicates that this leadership was Jewish, white and Middle Eastern.

By contrast with this approach, the late Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner argued that "the transition from the concept of the apostle and the Twelve to the concept of the priest (and bishop) ... is too simple to fit in with our present-day knowledge of the origins, structure and organization of the primitive Church" ("Women and the Priesthood," in *Concern for the Church*, Crossroad, 1981).

Contrary to the bald assertion that the arguments in favor of the ordination of women are "primarily cultural" while "all" of the arguments against it are theological, Rahner asked "whether, in view of the

cultural and sociological situation at the time ..., it is possible to look at all to Jesus and the Apostles for a plan in regard to the structure of the communities which ... could really be related to later times unambiguously and forever."

He also questioned the assumption that, if a practice has been part of the church for centuries or even from the beginning, it must be a "truly divine revelation," not "a merely human tradition."

Rahner insisted that "we can say confidently and with adequately certain historical knowledge that, in the cultural and sociological situation at the time, Jesus and the early Church could not in practice have considered and still less set up any female congregational leaders or presidents of the eucharistic celebration."

If Jesus had specific "theological" reasons for prohibiting ordination of women, other than those that were "primarily cultural," those reasons "should be explained more precisely and in detail." Otherwise, Rahner argued, Jesus' alleged opposition to the ordination of women "would appear to be based on an arbitrary decision."

If Jesus did, in fact, forbid the ordination of women, what possible reason could he (not the church) have had for doing so?

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

Christmas is all about hope

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 11:2-11. (R1) Isaiah 35:1-6, 10. (R2) James 5:7-10.

Every year about this time television stations bring out of their vaults an old black and white film that still speaks to people. The film is "It's a Wonderful Life."

George Bailey, the lead character in this heart-warming film, never felt like he amounted to much in this life. When things got so bad that he contemplated suicide, his guardian angel, Clarence, came down from heaven and showed him what his town of Bedford Falls would have been without him. The angel showed George how his job had benefited many families, how his little kindnesses and thoughtful acts had changed the lives of others, and how the ripples of his love had spread through the world.

Jimmy Stewart (George Bailey) in one scene raises his eyes to heaven and, following the script, pleads: "God ... God ... dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God ..."

Later, Stewart confessed, "As I said those words, I felt the loneliness, the hopelessness of people who had nowhere to turn and my eyes filled with tears. I broke



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

down sobbing. This was not planned at all, but the power of that prayer! the realization that our Father in heaven is there to help the hopeless, had reduced me to tears."

I wonder how many people have been touched by this simple film. Robert McFarlane, President Reagan's former national security adviser, said it gave him the inspiration to go on when indicted for his role in the Iran-Contra affair. A simple Christmas film gave him hope. Hope is what Christmas is all about.

Christ's coming into the world means hope for the hopeless. When John's followers asked Christ, "Are you He who is to come?" Jesus answered, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have

leprosy are cured, the deaf hear ... and the good news is preached to the poor." Notice that each of these people were facing challenges. But these were the people for whom Jesus came. Jesus came to bring hope to the hopeless. That's what Christmas is all about, to bring hope to the hopeless.

Christmas is also about healing those hurting.

Mark Cruikshank owned two transmission repair shops in the Chicago area. His wife Debbie was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Mark watched the woman he loved suffer. He tried to think of ways to help her. He realized that all he could do was pray. So he put up signs that read, PLEASE PRAY FOR DEBBIE THAT HER CANCER WILL GO AWAY.

Customers, many of them strangers, stopped to ask about Debbie and offer prayers. People of every faith came by to offer support. A few months before Christmas the Cruikshanks got news that Debbie's cancer was all gone. On Christmas Eve Mark posted new signs in his shops: PRAISE GOD, DEBBIE IS WINNING HER BATTLE WITH CANCER.

Not everyone wins the battle with cancer, but we do know that Christ's will is for healing. He never withheld healing from

anyone who asked for it. Christ's coming at Christmas is to bring hope to the hopeless and healing to the hurting. Finally, Christmas brings joy to all who believe. "They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee." No wonder we sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come."

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 14

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17;

Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday, December 15

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13;

Matthew 21:28-32

Wednesday, December 16

Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25;

Luke 7:19-23

Thursday, December 17

Genesis 49:2, 8-10; Matthew 1:1-17

Friday, December 18

Jeremiah 23:5-8; Matthew 1:18-24

Saturday, December 19

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25; Luke 1:5-25



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