

# COLUMNISTS

## All sides respect authority in church

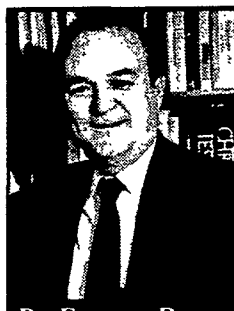
A certain plaintive tone inserted itself in Bishop Anthony Pilla's final address as president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, delivered in November at their annual fall meeting in Washington, D.C.

"In the church," he said, "there are those who ... are unwilling to accept a role for authority in the church. They endlessly debate the decisions of their pastors on issues great and small, extraordinary and routine. They appear to live either in a past or in a future of their own imagining but not in the present in which their pastors must make these decisions."

Unfortunately, Bishop Pilla offered us no help in identifying these peculiar individuals. I am aware of no one on the right (subscribers to *The Wanderer*, for example) or on the left (Catholics for a Free Choice, for example) who say that authority has no role in the church.

They may disagree with some decisions those in authority make, and they may also be critical of the types of individuals who are regularly promoted to and within the hierarchy. But it doesn't follow that they reject the very notion of ecclesiastical authority.

To be sure, there are troublesome people in many parishes who contribute far more than their fair share of weight to the crosses that hard-working pastors



essays in  
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

must normally bear. Such individuals seem never to be satisfied, and act as if no one in authority can ever do anything right.

But the attitude and behavior of such people are more likely the product of psychological factors rather than of a thought-out, antinomian theology.

Serious-minded critics of ecclesiastical authority — from left to right — do not deny that it has an important role to play in the church. They have no wish to replace authority with disorder and chaos. On the contrary, they want the church to function more effectively. They desire only the success of the mission it has received from Christ.

Of course, there are differences of opinion within the church about the nature of its missionary priorities and about the best ways to achieve them. Sympathetic readers of *The Wanderer*

have an outlook on a whole range of issues that differs sharply from that of sympathetic readers of the *National Catholic Reporter* (not that the NCR is the liberal equivalent of *The Wanderer*, as it is sometimes said, incorrectly).

The question is not whether authority has any role in the church (no one doubts that except those living in a state of complete unreality). The pertinent questions are: who exercises that authority, how do they exercise it, and how were they selected in the first place?

Who among the most pastorally active members of the church really believes that, over these past two decades, the best qualified priests have consistently been appointed to the hierarchy? Or that bishops have been selected primarily for their pastoral aptitude and experience, reflected in the confidence and respect they enjoy from the pastoral ministers of their dioceses? Or that there has been no discernible change in the quality of membership in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in comparison with the conferences of the 1970s and 1980s?

There was so much good in Bishop Pilla's final address to his brother bishops, particularly his strong emphasis on the importance of developing and encouraging lay leadership in the church. But those gifted lay people, most of whom are women, have a right to the kind of

pastoral leadership that they can trust and respect and which is capable, in turn, of trusting and respecting them. And of acting justly toward them as well.

This means a type of leader who sees his authority as a gift to be shared, rather than a power to be wielded to control people's thinking and behavior by threats and punishments. Such a person ministers collaboratively, welcomes dialogue (real dialogue, not the kind that simply waits for the other person to stop talking so that he can give the "right" answer), is open to those whose ideas differ from his own and is not quick to censor or marginalize them, is comfortable with, and respectful of, competent, self-assured women, and is at ease with himself, and especially with his own sexuality.

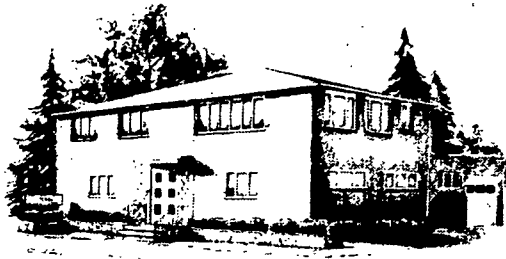
This is not the profile of a perfect and, therefore, unattainable pastoral leader. It is the profile of a healthy human being who may also have the gift of leadership.

A church that consistently recruited its pastors from such a pool of talent would not face a crisis of authority, and no outgoing president of the NCCB would feel it necessary to complain about Catholics who deny a role for authority in the church.

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

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