

# COLUMNISTS

## Saints surrender power easily

Two months ago the English Catholic journal *The Tablet* published an article by Cardinal Franz Koenig, retired archbishop of Vienna, on the need for decentralization of church authority (3/27/99).

To be sure, there was nothing in the cardinal's piece that had not been said and written by other bishops and theologians. However, his essay carried unusual weight because Cardinal Koenig was himself one of the leading figures at the Second Vatican Council and a "grand elector" at the 1978 conclave that elevated Karol Wojtyla to the papacy. It was Koenig who persuaded a number of Central and Eastern European cardinals that, if elected pope, Wojtyla would raise a powerful voice on behalf of "the Church of silence" behind the Iron Curtain.

History has shown that Cardinal Koenig was absolutely correct about the new pope's capacity to speak and act in support of the church under Communist domination. What Cardinal Koenig had not expected from the man he supported was a style of governance at apparent odds, in the cardinal's judgment, with the intentions of the council and Pope Paul VI.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (n. 27) had made clear, Cardinal Koenig insisted, that "the bishops are not the Pope's emissaries, nor are they here, as



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

### essays in theology

some maintain, to carry out the Pope's instructions." The bishops are not simply the assistants of the pope; they are his brother bishops with the same responsibility "to be solicitous for the entire Church" (n. 23). They are true collaborators and not mere agents of the pope.

Although the pope alone, as bishop of Rome, holds and exercises a primacy over the universal church, that primacy is always to be understood and exercised in the context of the collegiality of all the bishops. It is a primacy within, not over, the college of bishops.

Paul VI, the cardinal observed, "took pains to remodel the advisory and controlling function of the curial authorities, in order to bring them into line with the council's intentions. In the post-conciliar period, however, the Vatican authorities

have striven to take back autonomy and central leadership for themselves."

The intentions of the Roman Curia are honorable, of course. Its members are concerned to maintain the unity of the church. But there is another value besides unity, Cardinal Koenig insisted, and that value is diversity. The church is no longer primarily European in character. It has become a world church, embodying and reflecting the rich, multi-cultural diversity of the human community itself.

The governing structure of the church, therefore, must function not only to preserve the unity of the church, but also to promote and enhance its diversity. To achieve unity-in-diversity, there cannot be only one center of authority, imposing a single form of practice upon the whole church.

And that was the council's intention: To situate the primacy of the pope, an instrument of unity, within the larger context of the collegiality of all the bishops, an expression of the church's rich diversity.

Since the council, however, the Roman Curia has pushed the church in the opposite direction, toward centralization. "The curial authorities working in conjunction with the Pope," Cardinal Koenig argued, "have appropriated the tasks of the episcopal college. It is they who now carry out

almost all of them."

Not only is this development contrary to the intentions of the council and of Paul VI, the cardinal noted, but it is even contrary to the intentions of John Paul II himself, whose 1995 encyclical *Ut unum sint* ("That they may be one") repeatedly emphasized the link between the Petrine office and the episcopal college. All the bishops, the pope insisted, are "vicars and ambassadors of Christ." As bishop of Rome, the pope himself is a member of the college of bishops, who are his brothers in the ministry.

Not only is the current centralization of authority contrary to the principle of collegiality, Cardinal Koenig pointed out, but it is also against the principle of subsidiarity as well — a principle that stipulates that nothing should ever be done by a higher authority that can be done by a lower authority.

However, to return to "the decentralized form of the Church's command structure as practiced in earlier centuries" would require the curia and the pope to yield back to the bishops some of the power that has accrued to them.

None but saints surrender power easily.

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

## Faith calls us to challenge nation to be even greater

Summer is punctuated by three patriotic holidays, and I'm always puzzled about how we commemorate these in our churches. Sometimes we do so by singing a patriotic hymn at the end of Mass. Occasionally the homilist makes reference to some aspect of the day or its origins. Sometimes an American flag is displayed prominently somewhere in the sanctuary.

I'm always ambivalent about it all, since I try to recall that we belong to the Roman Catholic Church, which is supposed to be the universal church that transcends national boundaries. But then, I think, we are also Americans, so even as Catholics we belong to a particular country and recognize that part of our responsibility as citizens is the allegiance and loyalty we owe to our country.

I guess part of what I feel on these occasions has to do with an uneasiness that I experience around some of our rhetoric, which seems to be overdone on some of these occasions. For example, not too long ago I was part of a liturgical celebration that took a moment to glorify the sacrifice of life that young American soldiers have made in various of our country's wars.

I'm fully aware that the aim of this discourse was indeed to honor the courage and selflessness of those who have sacri-



BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

### the moral life

ficed so much in time of war. Still, the effect of the words spoken — in church — appeared also in some way to glorify war itself. I grow very uncomfortable when I think we, as religious people, in worship settings, glorify war more than we condemn it. But then I try to check myself on this because I recall that the sacrifices on the part of many individuals are real, while I enjoy many benefits because of living in this country for which I have personally "paid" very little.

I guess the contradictions I experience on these matters are not entirely unique to me, either. I just finished a conversation with someone who was complaining wildly about the taxes he has to pay, even while trying in the same conversation to make me aware of the honor entailed in the mil-

itary service he had rendered in time of war. As a member of a religious order I neither pay taxes nor serve in the military — but of the two, I'd surely prefer to pay some taxes in peacetime than risk my life in battle! I guess for all of us it can be more "politically correct" to attack taxes than to draw attention to the hardship and futility of waging war.

In looking for some wisdom on this issue, I turned to the new Catechism of the Catholic Church. There is no index entry there under "patriotism," but the section on the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and mother," includes a section on civil authorities. Under this heading, the catechism deals with the duties of civil authorities, the duties of citizens, and the political community and the church.

These sections do indeed mention the duty of gratitude which all citizens bear, as well as the duty of paying taxes. There is mention also of the duty to welcome the foreigner who is in search of security and the means of livelihood. There is also mention of the duty of "just criticisms" of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and the good of community. There is even mention of the occasional duty to refuse obedience to civil authorities when their demands are contrary to

those of an upright conscience.

There are sections on war and peace, too, included in the passages dealing with the Fifth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Basically, these sections talk about limiting the arms race, avoiding armed conflict and working to preserve peace.

The sections in the catechism served to reinforce my own uncertainty about ways in which we "celebrate" national holidays in our churches. I might be more comfortable if some of the themes highlighted in the catechism were included in the "patriotic rhetoric" we allow in our churches on these civil holidays.

Rather than extolling the single theme of heroism in times of warfare, we might consider reminding one another that the Kingdom of God includes welcoming all kinds of "foreigners" into our society and societies, includes criticizing systems that keep some people poor and excluded, includes doing all we can to promote a non-violent approach to conflict resolution. Challenging our nation to become even greater seems to me to be a better fit with our religious vision than does simply exalting our past victories in war.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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