

COLUMNISTS

Prayer proposal lacks vision

Members of Congress, especially those representing culturally conservative districts, recognize the risk in casting a vote against prayer in public schools or the posting of the Ten Commandments in these and other public places. It was entirely in keeping with the risk-avoidance mentality of many politicians, therefore, that U.S. House of Representatives passed last month an amendment to the juvenile crime bill permitting the display of the Commandments in public school classrooms, even though the amendment had little chance of survival in the Senate and even less in the U.S. Supreme Court.

Undoubtedly, such a stance would also win support within segments of the U.S. Catholic community for which questions of constitutionality, the rights of minorities and the religious incompetence of the State are of little account.

Ironically, one of the strongest arguments against prayer in public schools may have been provided by one of its advocates, Michael Novak.

Mr. Novak recently contributed an op-ed piece to *The New York Times*, "With Liberty and Prayer for All" (6/18/99), in which he argued the case for "a moment of prayer every day in the public schools" and scolded "the powerful minority" that has thus far prevented the majority of



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Americans from having what it clearly "deserves." In so doing, this truculent minority commits the most grievous of civil sins, the sin against "pluralism."

Pluralism requires the majority to respect the constitutional rights of minorities in matters of religious practice.

Mr. Novak, however, may have unwittingly provided the most persuasive argument against his own position when he proposed wording for an actual prayer, with which, he claimed, even "nonbelievers feel comfortable." The text follows:

"Creator, who has endowed in us our inalienable rights, God of nature and nature's laws, undecivable Judge of the rectitude of our intentions, we have a firm reliance upon the protection of divine Providence, which you have extended over

our nation from its beginnings. Amen."

If anyone of competence in these matters can imagine such a "prayer" being recited with lingual dexterity, much less understanding, by a classroom of, let us say, fourth-graders, then I should readily defer to Mr. Novak's pedagogical acuity.

In 1962 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Engel vs. Vitale* struck down as unconstitutional a much less rhetorically challenged prayer that had been composed in 1951 by the New York State Board of Regents: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country."

Justice Hugo Black, writing for the majority, insisted that "the constitutional prohibition against laws respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that in this country it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as part of a religious program carried on by the government."

Predictably, the decision unleashed a torrent of criticism from religious leaders, including Catholics who had previously been suspicious of the influence of Protestantism in the public school system. By that time, however, a common enemy

had emerged: secularism and "atheistic Communism."

At a subsequent press conference President John F. Kennedy was asked about the Supreme Court's decision and efforts in Congress to introduce legislation for a constitutional amendment authorizing prayer in public schools.

The president pointed out that "we have in this case a very easy remedy and that is to pray ourselves. I would think that it would be a welcome reminder to every American family that we can pray a good deal more at home, we can attend our churches with a good deal more fidelity, and we can make the true meaning of prayer much more important in the lives of all of our children...."

"I would hope," he continued, "that as a result of this decision that all American parents will intensify their efforts at home — and the rest of us will support the Constitution and the responsibility of the Supreme Court in interpreting it — which is theirs, and given to them by the Constitution."

President Kennedy's words are as valid today as they were in 1962.

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

The church is our mother

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 25): (R3) Matthew 13:44-52. (R1) 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12. (R2) Romans 8:28-30.

Sunday's Gospel contains several parables concerning the kingdom of heaven: the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price and the great net thrown into the sea.

First, our Lord said that "the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

In our Lord's day people used the ground as the safest place to keep their wealth. This was especially the case in Palestine, which was often a battleground. Armies marched across it again and again. People hid their treasures in the earth, then returned to claim them when hostilities ceased. Sometimes they would never return. So in those days what was found belonged to the finder.

The interesting point in the first parable was that the finder was not on a treasure hunt. He just stumbled across the treasure. It was the find of a lifetime. He was so happy and excited that he sold all his belongings so that he could buy the field.

The lesson is that a man will often find his greatest treasure just by doing his



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

everyday work; and secondly that to enter the Kingdom of God is worth any sacrifice.

The second parable was about a pearl of great value. In the ancient world pearls had a very special place in men's hearts. People desired them for their value, but especially for their beauty. A fine pearl was valued then as gold is in our own day.

Unlike the worker who stumbled across the treasure unexpectedly, the pearl merchant was actually out looking for a perfect pearl. When he found it, he was filled with joy and sold all his possessions to buy it.

The point of the parable is that having Christ is worth more than any treasure we might ever possess. Salvation is the pearl of great price. Obtaining it is worth any

sacrifice.

The third parable is about a great net cast into the sea, collecting fish of every kind. The net is the church. The net cannot select what fish it will catch. Neither can the church, which gathers both the just and sinners. God will make the separation on Judgment Day.

No matter what sins sinners commit, they still belong to the church for they possess the indelible character of baptism and confirmation and the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Just as a sick or paralyzed part of the body receives help from the rest of the body, so it is with the church. The church works against the evil that corrupts the souls of sinners. She struggles to keep them in the fold, to bring them back to life through her love. She hopes through the power of patience, gentleness and pardon that sinners will return to the church. She does not forget for a single day that she is a mother. She prays for all her children, good and bad, and waits for all with infinite patience.

Though the church is made up of sinners, she herself is sinless. She is the mystical body of Christ, enjoying his holiness.

The church is the source of sanctity in the world. She continually strives to draw

people close to God. By her sacraments she brings forth children and nourishes them; by her faith she strengthens them; by her laws, she guides them. Those who have followed her are the armies of martyrs and virgins and confessors. The church is holy and she calls all to holiness; and they will achieve it if they listen.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 26

Exodus 32:15-24, 30-34;

Matthew 13:31-35

Tuesday, July 27

Exodus 33:7-11, 34:5-9, 28;

Matthew 13:36-43

Wednesday, July 28

Exodus 34:29-35; Matthew 13:44-46

Thursday, July 29

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38; John 11:19-27

or Luke 10:38-42

Friday, July 30

Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27, 34-37;

Matthew 13:54-58

Saturday, July 31

Leviticus 25:1, 8-17; Matthew 14:1-12

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