

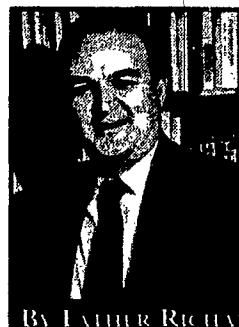
COLUMNISTS

Church shares 'gift of authority'

The second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) recently issued a major statement on "The Gift of Authority" (Origins, 5/27/99). As in the case of previous "agreed statements," it will require the evaluation and approval of the two churches. If precedent is a guide, however, the Anglicans will warmly embrace the document; the Vatican (specifically, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) will not.

Like most statements of this sort, some of it is written in a style inaccessible to the general reader. If the authors intended their statement to be read and discussed by a significant number of lay people in each church, I suspect that the hope will be unfulfilled. If the primary intention was to engage the interest of church leaders, theologians and especially those directly involved in the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, one can be more confident of its success.

It is my hope that this and next week's columns will bring the most positive features of "The Gift of Authority" to the attention of a wider audience, and that some may actually read it. In the best of all worlds, they might encourage their pastors or directors of religious education to establish an ecumenical study group to discuss the statement and to de-



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

vised ways to implement it locally.

The statement reminds us that authority is, etymologically, a matter of authorship. Because God is the author of life, the "root of all true authority is thus the activity of the triune God, who authors life in all its fullness."

And because Jesus Christ is the Son of God, he shares in, and embodies, the ultimate authority that belongs to God alone. This authority shone through in such fashion that his contemporaries recognized it as something radically new. Jesus did not make his authority an end in itself. Rather, he "demonstrated it by his self-giving service in sacrificial love."

Finally, because the church is the Body of Christ, it, too, shares in the authority of its Lord. For the church, however, authority is not an inherent characteristic.

It is a gift, "a gift of God to bring reconciliation and peace to humankind."

In spite of occasional lofty, and at times elusive, theological rhetoric, the document contains a refreshing spirit of realism. It readily acknowledges, for example, that the "exercise of authority can be oppressive and destructive ... even in churches when they uncritically adopt certain patterns of authority."

And while the statement is insistent that it is the Holy Spirit who teaches the church, who keeps alive the memory of what Jesus said and did, and who creates and sustains the communion of faith and life that makes the church what it is, the statement acknowledges that the church sometimes forgets, neglects, and even abuses elements of that communion and of the tradition entrusted to it.

These occasional failings require the church, with the help of its theologians, biblical scholars, and holy persons, to retrieve the forgotten and neglected elements, and to sift out what is "seen to be inadequate or even misleading in a new context." The statement refers to this whole process as "reception."

Reception, however, operates always within a great and rich diversity of traditions — a diversity that is itself "the practical manifestation of catholicity and

confirms rather than contradicts the vigor of Tradition." (The document properly distinguishes between tradition, as the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, and traditions, as the multiple vehicles through which the Gospel is expressed and handed on.)

The church's fidelity to tradition does not require "uniformity of expression and formulation at all levels in all situations," and the task of discerning and communicating the tradition is not limited to any single group. "The people of God as a whole is the bearer of the living Tradition," the statement insists. "The Holy Spirit works through all members of the community."

"Theologians in particular serve the communion of the whole church by exploring whether and how new insights should be integrated into the ongoing stream of Tradition."

But it is not a matter of one ecclesial constituency against another. There is a "mutual give and take, in which bishops, clergy and lay people receive from as well as give to others within the whole body."

The church is a "symphony" in which all have a part to play.

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

God of miracles will provide

18th Sunday of the Year: (R3) Matthew 14:13-21. (R1) Isaiah 55:1-3. (R2) Roinans 8:35, 37-39.

I am sure the disciples of Jesus thought he was in over his head that day when he set out to feed a multitude of 5,000 men and perhaps over 10,000 women and children with only five loaves of bread and two fish. No doubt the Apostles surely thought it couldn't be done! Impossible!

When Charles Kettering, research head of General Motors, wanted a problem solved, he would call together his staff. However, he would first place a table outside the meeting room with a sign that read: "Leave your slide rules here." If he didn't do that, he says, he'd find someone reaching for his slide rule in the middle of the meeting. And in a few minutes, this person would be on his feet saying, "Boss, you can't do it."

Isn't that true no matter what we try to accomplish in life? There is always someone saying, "You can't do it." And because so many listen to people who say it can't be done, they often give up before victory is theirs.

There are always people who are predicting disaster. When Lou Holtz led the University of Arkansas into the 1978 Or-



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

ange Bowl, he was warned that fans might throw oranges at his team.

"Could be worse," Holtz said. "We could be going to the Gator Bowl."

That's a great attitude.

The disciples of Jesus were focusing on their problems, not on their possibilities. Jesus told them to give the crowd something to eat and they said, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

Jesus didn't ask them what they had to work with. He knew that any task undertaken at God's command is possible. It matters not how big or small that task may be. With God nothing is impossible.

Jesus took five loaves and two fish, and looking up toward heaven, he blessed them and gave them to the disciples to give to the crowd. All 15,000 had plenty

to eat and there were baskets of food left over. Impossible! But it happened.

When Col. Trumble was dying, he told his minister about a miracle he experienced during the Civil War.

In feeble tones, Trumble told of being one of the many Union soldiers incarcerated at the infamous Andersonville, Georgia, prisoner-of-war camp, where men died by the hundreds.

Food was scarce, Trumble recalled, but even worse was the scarcity of water. In desperation, he said, one day he and several other prisoners went to the western edge of the encampment and knelt in prayer. "We prayed to God to help us," he said. "To our surprise, in a few minutes a huge black cloud came and stood above the stockade. Suddenly, a brilliant flash of lightning burst out from the cloud, striking a huge rock and splitting it apart. A stream of water began to gush out and continued to flow."

In spring of 1935, the minister was speaking in Columbus, Ga., on "The Water of Life." He suddenly felt impressed to tell the story of Col. Trumble. After the service people swarmed around him.

"We know about that spring," they said. "The site of Andersonville is just a few miles from here. The story is true."

The next day the minister went with friends to the site. In the center of the former camp was the spring with the sign, "Providence Spring," commemorating the miracle that had produced it.

God is a God of miracles. He can provide for our needs.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, August 2
Numbers 11:4-15; Matthew 14:22-36

Tuesday, August 3
Numbers 12:1-13;
Matthew 15:1-2, 10-14

Wednesday, August 4
Numbers 13:1-2, 25-14:1, 26-29, 34-35;
Matthew 15:21-28

Thursday, August 5
Numbers 20:1-13; Matthew 16:13-23

Friday, August 6
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; 2 Peter 1:16-19;
Matthew 17:1-9

Saturday, August 7
Deuteronomy 6:4-13;
Matthew 17:14-20

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