

## COLUMNISTS

## Document calls for church to engage cultures

On June 1 the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Culture released an important document on the opportunities and challenges for a pastoral approach to culture.

What is remarkable about the document is that it does not follow the militantly countercultural line promoted by some of the Vatican's most voluble loyalists, especially in the U.S. church.

By contrast, the document insists that, in its mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the world, the church cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without become subject to any one of them (n. 4). Indeed, it is impossible to proclaim the Gospel without employing language and culture. The only cultural elements to be rejected are those that are a source of sin and fruit of sin.

Contrary to the either/or mentality of the counterculturalists, this recent Vatican document calls for a balanced both/and approach. The relationship between the Gospel and culture must be reciprocal. In the light of the Gospel, the church must constantly discern between the values and countervalues in a given culture, so as to build on the former and vigorously com-



## essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

bat the latter (n. 5).

The Pontifical Council on Culture is taking a page here from Pope John Paul II's 1991 encyclical on the missions, *Redemptoris missio*, which called upon the church to take the good elements that already exist in (cultures) and renew them from within. This balanced pastoral approach applies to the whole range of cultural expressions, for example, the mass media and information technology, science and bioethics, the family and education, art and leisure.

This document recognizes the diversity of cultural situations that have developed from the perspectives of different religions. Indeed, it deplores the church's past failures to take seriously enough the positive cultural values of non-Christian religions in Africa (and elsewhere), with the

unfortunate consequence that they were not integrated with the Gospel. Today, particularly since Vatican II, the document declares, the church recognizes these religious values and promotes those that are consonant with the Gospel. The positive values enshrined in these traditional cultures, such as a sense of family, love and respect for life, veneration of ancestors, a sense of solidarity and community, respect for the chief and elders, are a solid basis for the inculturation of faith, whereby the Gospel penetrates the whole of culture and brings it to fruition (n. 19).

If Asia appears largely unaffected by the message of Christ, the document asks, is that not chiefly because Christianity is still perceived there as a foreign religion introduced by Westerners that has not been sufficiently adapted, thought through and lived in the cultures of Asia? Many elements of spirituality and mysticism like holiness, self-denial, chastity, universal love, a love for peace, prayer and contemplation that live in these cultures can lead to faith in the God of Jesus Christ (n. 20).

At the same time, however, the church must proclaim the dignity of the human person and engage in the struggle to cleanse society of violence, social injustice, the abuses of which street children are victims, drug trafficking, etc. In this context

and affirming her preferential option for the poor and the excluded, the church is duty bound to promote a culture of solidarity at every level of society (n. 21).

The special task of the church in secularized countries is to help them to rediscover the Christian roots of their culture (n. 27). There is a need for theological formation in these countries because many educated Christians find doctrinal fidelity and growth in faith impossible unless they can reflect on faith just as seriously as they do their profane culture or on their professional life (n. 31). Although the document does not say so explicitly, this requires access to a critically scientific theology, not one that simply repeats or paraphrases magisterial pronouncements.

It is a formidable, even mammoth, pastoral and missionary challenge that opens out to the church as it stands on the threshold of a new millennium. It involves many approaches and...immense possibilities.

The challenge is no less than to create a new humanism, capable of giving birth throughout the world to cultures transformed by the prodigious newness of Christ (n. 39). That means engaging with cultures, not simply opposing them.

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

## Which father will we follow?

22nd Sunday of the Year (Aug. 29): (R3) Matthew 16:21-27. (R1) Jeremiah 20:7-9. (R2) Romans 12:1-2.

A newspaper report said that it may be harder to go to Hell this year. A bridge on the main road leading to Hell, Mich., was badly in need of repair. The project could close the road for three months. Business owners complained that the work could cause loss of business even though the plans to fix the road to Hell sprang from good intentions. The road suffers damage each year when Hell freezes over.

Even though the saying that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions is not biblical, it is accurate. In Sunday's Gospel Jesus says good intentions are not enough. His followers are to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him.

To deny ourselves is to make a decision about who controls our lives. Will it be Christ or ourselves?

Kent Crockett in *The 911 Handbook* tells us that inside every airplane are instruments that are critical to flying the aircraft. The instruments will give a true reading of how the aircraft is flying, even if a pilot's mind may tell him differently. On a clear, sunny day a pilot may not need some of these instruments, but at night or in poor visibility, these instruments become vital to his survival.



## a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

When we give ourselves to Christ's control, we are trusting him to guide the "instruments" inside our hearts, even though our minds may tell us to do just the opposite. We cannot vacillate between God's instructions and our own logic. We must deny ourselves and trust him!

Then Jesus said, "Take up your cross." This means to commit ourselves to do those things that bring honor to Christ and help build up his kingdom.

Taking up our crosses means doing what we ought because of our commitment to him. It might include something as simple as visiting shut-ins or helping teach a catechism class or being kind and helpful to someone in need.

Anytime we take courageous steps — steps we know Jesus would take if he were in our places — we are taking up crosses.

Years ago, the USS Pueblo was hijacked by the North Korean military. Thirteen of the captured sailors were forced to sit in a rigid manner around a table. After several hours of strict immobility the door was flung open and a North Korean guard brutally beat the sailor in the first chair. This happened three days in a row.

Knowing the man could not survive another beating, another sailor took his place. When the guard came in, he beat the new victim senseless. For weeks, each day a different sailor sat in that horrible chair. At last the guards gave up in exasperation. They were unable to beat that kind of sacrificial love. These sailors were taking up a cross to help another.

Finally, the third step is to follow Christ. So many Christians deny themselves, take up their crosses, but don't follow Christ. Only when we try to walk in his steps does life take on joy and meaning. We can never be all that he was; but we can try to be like him.

A woman was abandoned by her husband to raise their 11-year-old son John. A few years later John moved in with his father who soon abandoned him. John began living on the streets. One day, she received a call that her son was in a vegetative state due to an LSD overdose.

Eventually, John recovered and became

a fine young man. But some people still rejected him because of his father's reputation. One day, he cried, "Oh, Mom, am I always going to be compared with my father? Will I end up like Dad?"

She put her arms around her son and said, "Johnny, you have two fathers: one on earth and one in heaven. Which one will you follow?"

The central question in life is which father will we follow?

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

## Daily Readings

Monday, August 30  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18;  
Luke 4:16-30

Tuesday, August 31  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, 9-11;  
Luke 4:31-37

Wednesday, September 1  
Colossians 1:1-8; Luke 4:38-44

Thursday, September 2  
Colossians 1:9-14; Luke 5:1-11

Friday, September 3  
Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 5:33-39

Saturday, September 4  
Colossians 1:21-23; Luke 6:1-5

## COURIER CLASSIFIEDS

## GENERAL

## Announcements

**ADOPTIONS** The Catholic Courier does not publish adoption advertising. To obtain a list of agencies that serve birth mothers and adoptive parents, call 716-328-4340. Agencies wishing to be included on this list may send information to the Catholic Courier.

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