

COLUMNISTS

Thank God for Vatican II

As we approach the last Thanksgiving holiday of the 20th century and of the Second Christian Millennium (yielding to the conventional belief that the next century and millennium both begin in 2000 rather than 2001), readers will determine for themselves what is most deserving of gratitude to God in their own lives, in the world at large, and in the church. This week's column focuses on the third item, offering a hymn of thanksgiving for the Second Vatican Council.

Only those Catholics who were at least in their mid-teens when the council opened in October 1962 can appreciate the extent to which the council renewed and enriched the life of the Catholic Church. Such Catholics would have been born no later than 1947 and would be at least 52 years old now.

Catholics born after 1955 (and who are now 44 or younger) have no memory of the pre-Vatican II church. They would not have even reached the traditional "age of reason" (age 7) when Pope John XXIII opened the council.

And yet much of the nostalgia for pre-Vatican II Catholicism — with an underlying, not-so-subtle contempt for the council itself — emanates from a relatively small group of Catholics under the



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

age of 52, many of whom are still in their 20s and 30s and were born after the council had already adjourned.

It was a time of great hope and excitement in the church. The council, and the two popes who led it, John XXIII and Paul VI, summoned us to an even higher standard of Christian life and pastoral ministry. The sense of exhilaration it fostered was contagious, outside the church as well as inside, with the sad exception of those locked behind the Iron Curtain, in Central and Eastern Europe particularly.

The council brought us to see that the church consists of all the baptized, not only the clergy and the hierarchy. Every member — laity, religious, and clergy alike — is called to full participation in the church's mission and ministries, and

especially its worship.

The council also helped us to recognize that the church is larger than the Catholic Church — that Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox Oriental Christians separated from Rome also belong to the one Body of Christ, albeit to different degrees.

The council expanded our horizons even beyond the separated Christian churches. Jews in particular, but also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others have a place in God's benevolent plan for the salvation of humankind.

The council similarly expanded our idea of mission. The church exists not only to celebrate the sacraments, especially the Mass, to preach and to teach, and to minister to the sick, but also to advance the causes of social justice, human rights and peace. The social apostolate, viewed before the council as simply a preliminary step to mission, came to be seen as an essential part of evangelization itself.

The council also brought us to see the error of the pre-Vatican II axiom, "Error has no rights." The council actually changed the previous, non-infallible teaching that when Catholicism becomes the majority religion of a nation, it has both the right and the duty to call upon

the state to suppress the public expression of all other religions. The council reminded us that faith is a free act. But faith is not free if people are penalized for not having it.

It has been almost 14 years since Pope John Paul II convened an extraordinary world synod of bishops in Rome (November-December 1985) to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the council's adjournment. Many Catholics at the time were worried about that synod because of persistent rumors that the pope was going to use it as an occasion to repeal the council, for all practical purposes.

That did not happen. The synod and the pope issued messages of praise and thanksgiving for the council, calling it an unmistakable work of the Holy Spirit.

Less than a decade later, John Paul II insisted in his apostolic letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* that "the best preparation for the new millennium" is "a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole church." Catholics under the age of 50, take note.

As for the council itself, *Deo gratias.*

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

It can be a sin to play it safe

34th Sunday, Christ the King: (R3) Matthew 25:31-46; (R1) Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; (R2) 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28.

Farmers tell us that no other domestic animal quite matches the goat in its tendency to switch suddenly from frolicking to butting heads. The Romans called the goat caper, and its behavior led them to label outlandish conduct as "cutting capers." Italians who knew the goat as the capriccio adapted its name to describe a person subject to erratic whims and sudden willful behavior. Thus was born the word "capricious."

On the whole, goats do not have a favorable reputation — excepting for the fact that some people prize their milk.

Jesus contrasts sheep and goats in his parable. The sheep enter his kingdom; the goats do not.

It is interesting that the parable condemns a sin of omission (not doing what we should have done) more severely than it does a sin of commission (doing something we shouldn't have done). We know that evil actions — like impurity, murder and stealing — are sins. But we don't reckon apathy or indifference to others in the face of suffering to be sins as well.

Indifference was the sin of the goats. If we see somebody who is hurting for what



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

ever reason, it is our responsibility to do what we can to help.

A man named Jeff McMullen once had to make a decision between being a sheep or a goat. Jeff played the character of Ronald McDonald in Arizona and Southern California for the McDonald's Corporation. On "Ronald's Day" once a month, Jeff visited hospitals, bringing a little happiness into places where no one ever looked forward to going.

The visits made a difference for children and adults experiencing a "down time." Everyone loved his coming. But two restrictions were placed upon his visits. He had to be accompanied by McDonald's personnel and hospital personnel. Secondly, he was to have no physical contact with any of the patients. Breaking

these rules could cost him his job.

One day, as he was heading down a hallway for home, Jeff heard a little voice call, "Ronald, Ronald." He stopped, looked into the room from which the voice came, and saw a 5-year-old boy lying in his dad's arms, with all kinds of medical equipment hooked up to him. Mother, Grandma, Grandpa and a nurse were there.

He asked the boy his name; it was Billy. Jeff did a few simple magic tricks for Billy. As he stepped back to leave, Billy said, "Ronald, would you hold me?" Jeff thought of losing his job. But Billy kept insisting. So Jeff sent everyone out of the room except the nurse taking care of the equipment. Then he picked up little Billy, so frail and so scared. They laughed and cried for 45 minutes, and talked about the things that worried him. Billy was worried about his little brother and his dog.

On his way out of the room, with tear-streaked makeup running down his neck, Jeff gave Billy's mom and dad his real name and phone number. Less than 48 hours later, he received a phone call from Billy's mom. She told him that Billy had passed away. She and her husband simply wanted to thank him for making a differ-

ence in their little boy's life. Shortly after Jeff had left the room, she said, "Billy looked at her and said, 'Momma, I don't care anymore if I see Santa this year ... because I was held by Ronald McDonald.'"

Jeff could have played it safe and have kept his distance. That's what the goats would have done — but not the sheep. "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

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

Daily Readings

Monday, November 22
Daniel 1:1-6, 8-20; Luke 21:1-4
Tuesday, November 23
Daniel 2:31-45; Luke 21:5-11
Wednesday, November 24
Daniel 5:1-6, 13-14, 16-17, 23-28;
Luke 21:12-19
Thursday, November 25
Daniel 6:12-28; Luke 21:20-28
Friday, November 26
Daniel 7:2-14; Luke 21:29-33
Saturday, November 27
Daniel 7:15-27; Luke 21:34-36

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