

COLUMNISTS

Get rid of mandate's rigidity

The U.S. Catholic bishops have approved a new, more legalistic version of the "Application" of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* ("From the heart of the Church"), the 1990 papal document on Catholic universities. The vote was preceded by assurances that the bishops have no intention or desire to interfere in the internal operations of these institutions.

Only three years ago the bishops approved by an even larger margin (224-6, as against 223-31) an "Application" that did not include the neuralgic requirement that Catholic theologians teaching in Catholic universities and colleges receive a mandate from the local bishop to teach "in communion with the Church."

Nothing has happened in the meantime to justify a change in that vote — except pressure from the Vatican to do so. The Vatican judged that the "Application" approved by the bishops in 1996 was not sufficiently "juridical" in character. The revised "Application" included the canonical requirement of a mandate for Catholic theologians teaching in Catholic universities and colleges.

What effect will this have on these institutions? Internally, little or none. Externally, possibly much.

Since the conferral, denial or withdrawal of a mandate should not affect a



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

faculty member's contractual status in a university or college, the requirement is a matter of moral persuasion without legal teeth. The academic institution would have to change its by-laws if it were to attempt any action related to the mandates.

Tensions could develop within a department of theology, however, if some faculty members were voluntarily to seek a mandate from the local bishop and others did not, as a matter of principle. Those in the wider academic community who already have a low estimation of theology because it is a faith-based discipline and of Catholic higher education because it is church-related will now have an additional, more dramatic reason to be dismissive of Catholic theologians and of the institutions in which they teach.

It may also happen that younger

Catholics who have thought of theology as a possible academic career will choose another area of teaching and scholarship.

Those who do undertake theological studies or who are about to complete their doctoral work may decide not to apply to a Catholic institution because they might think they have to pass through two hoops to secure an appointment: the rigorous academic review of the faculty and administration, and then the ecclesiastical scrutiny of the local bishop.

The approval of the mandates could also have a chilling effect on the recruitment of young Catholics to doctoral programs in Catholic universities. They might conclude that the academic atmosphere in a non-Catholic institution would be preferable to that of a Catholic university, and that a degree from a non-Catholic university would have more credibility and carry more weight, in terms of future job prospects, than one from a Catholic university. These same perceptions could impede the recruitment of undergraduate students as well.

Should these effects occur, the bishops' vote would have the sadly ironic consequence of diminishing the Catholic character of theology departments and of depleting the numbers of younger Catholic theologians available for teaching theo-

gy in a Catholic university or college.

There is also a second possible irony. Nowhere in a Catholic university or college is the Catholic character of the institution a matter of greater concern and corporate commitment than in its department of theology. If there is a danger of erosion of Catholic identity in Catholic universities, the danger is present outside, not inside, their departments of theology — in the appointment of administrators and faculty in other departments, colleges and institutes of the university.

And yet the only faculty members in these institutions who would be subject to ecclesiastical review are the very ones who are most fully engaged in sustaining and promoting Catholic identity.

If the Vatican and the bishops are really worried about Notre Dame, Boston College and Georgetown, for example, going the way of Harvard, Princeton and Chicago, why not require mandates of all Catholic deans, institute directors and professors in every department and college of the university?

Ill-considered and unwieldy? Of course, it is.

And so is the whole idea of mandates.

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

Approach Christmas season with faith, not fear

3rd Sunday of Advent (Dec. 12): (R3) John 1:6-8, 19-28. (R1) Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11. (R2) 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24.

There was a children's pageant for Christmas. Ralph wanted very much to play the role of Joseph. When he didn't get the part, he refused to be in the program, but his mother insisted that Ralph do his duty. So he was the innkeeper.

Ralph decided on revenge. When the part occurred in which Joseph inquired about a room, Ralph grinned and announced, "Come on in. We've got plenty of room!" The audience, especially Ralph's mother, gasped. But the boy playing Joseph was equal to the occasion. Turning to the audience, he said, "Hey, this place is a dump. We'd rather stay in a stable!"

What would life be without such surprises?

Adlai Stevenson, when head of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, made a marketing agreement for the walnut industry. The industry thanked him by sending him an enormous gunnysack full of packages of walnuts. Stevenson was happy because he had not done his Christmas shopping. So he took these packages and sent them to all his Washington friends. Then he made the awful



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

discovery. In each package was a little card saying, "Merry Christmas from the walnut industry to Adlai Stevenson."

Some surprises we can do without, but Christmas is not one. God comes into the world in the person of a tiny babe. Angels sing and shepherds rejoice and the world is forever changed. That's one surprise the world is still coming to terms with. John the Baptist was a surprise, too. People asked how this rough-hewn preacher could lay a path for the Messiah.

John taught that faith is always better than fear. Fear causes us to do absurd things. A businessman bought a pager for each member of his staff as a Christmas gift. While he was driving home all 50 pagers went off at once. He was so startled, he drove his car into a lamp post. Af-

ter he had assessed the damage, the businessman turned his attention to the message on the 50 pagers. It read: "Congratulations on a successful purchase!" The company from whom he had bought the pagers was simply wishing him well.

How much better to approach life with faith, not fear. Faith empowers; fear cripples. Faith moves us forward; fear holds us back. Christ came to banish our fears.

Think how often in the Christmas narratives we read, "Fear not." "And the angel said unto the shepherds, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...'"

"Fear not, Mary ... the Holy Spirit shall come upon you..."

"Fear not, Zachariah: for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear a son, and you shall call him John."

"Joseph, son of David, fear not to take Mary as your wife..."

That is the message of Christmas. Maybe that is why God came to us as a tiny babe. One of humankind's oldest fears is fear of God. In most religions God is a capricious being capable of mighty anger who can crush people at his slightest whim. But who's afraid of a baby?

A baby is gentleness and weakness and dependence and joy. The message of

Christmas is, as Paul says, "Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks (R2)."

So, do not worry about the future. There is one who was born in a manger in Bethlehem who will never forsake us regardless of our situation.

The good news of Christmas is, we can trust in God. Fear not!

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

Daily Readings

Monday, December 13

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17;

Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday, December 14

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13;

Matthew 21:28-32

Wednesday, December 15

Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25;

Luke 7:18-23

Thursday, December 16

Isaiah 54:1-10; Luke 7:24-30

Friday, December 17

Genesis 49:2, 8-10; Matthew 1:1-17

Saturday, December 18

Jeremiah 23:5-8; Matthew 1:18-24

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