

COLUMNISTS

Anti-Catholicism in the House

When the Republican leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives rejected a Catholic priest as the new chaplain of that body, in spite of overwhelming support for his candidacy from a bipartisan selection committee, a number of people smelled an anti-Catholic rat, and said so.

A priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and a professor of political science for many years at Marquette University, Father Timothy O'Brien was one of three finalists, narrowed down from 47 candidates by an 18-member committee that had spent six months screening them. A majority of Republicans and Democrats on the committee chose Father O'Brien as the best candidate and recommended his appointment.

A three-man leadership committee composed of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, Majority Leader Dick Armey and Minority Leader Dick Gephardt interviewed the three finalists and, by a 2-1 vote (with Gephardt in the minority), selected Charles Parker Wright, a Presbyterian minister whom the bipartisan committee had ranked third of three. U.S. Rep. Thomas Bliley, a Virginia Republican who served as co-chair of the bipartisan committee, said he was surprised by the selection of Mr. Wright.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Father O'Brien told The New York Times later that, during the course of his interview with the leadership committee, he was "a bit shocked" when U.S. Rep. Dick Armey of Texas "indicated that he came from North Dakota originally and was raised in a very anti-Catholic environment, and I thought that was kind of a strange comment to make."

Father O'Brien also noted that, in his second interview before the 18-member screening committee, he ran into an "evangelical Protestant line of questioning" from Republicans, including a request that he identify three scriptural passages by which he lived his life, a question about how his moral character could be judged if he was not married, and an inquiry about whether his wearing of a collar would be divisive.

After an investigation by TV commentator Mark Shields, the stench of anti-Catholic bias filled the air. Father O'Brien said if he had been the committee's first choice (as he was) and had also been a clergyman "of any mainline Protestant denomination," his appointment would have gone unquestioned.

One of Father O'Brien's chief promoters, U.S. Rep. Jerry Kleczka, a Wisconsin Democrat, charged that the process was "rigged."

It's not just Democrats who were upset about the outcome. U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Illinois, said: "I hate to think it is anti-Catholic bigotry, but I don't know what other conclusion to draw."

Father O'Brien also told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that a senior Republican House member had told him "how this thing would shake out. And it's exactly the way it turned out."

Two Catholic Republican members of the House, neither of whom was on the committee, phoned the press, unbidden, to give assurances that neither Speaker Hastert nor Majority Leader Armey had ever shown signs of anti-Catholic bias. If so, why did they reject an unmistakably strong, bipartisan recommendation to appoint Father O'Brien as the next House of Representatives chaplain, in-

deed as its first-ever Catholic chaplain?

The suspicion in Washington is that the Speaker and Majority Leader knew the nomination of a Catholic priest would never be acceptable to one of their party's most demanding support groups, namely, the religious right. More exactly, the Protestant fundamentalist and evangelical religious right.

These are the same folks who welcome an occasional alliance with Catholics on issues like abortion and school vouchers, but who continue to believe that the Mass, celebrated by priests like Father O'Brien, is "hocus pocus" (a play on the Latin words of consecration, "Hoc est enim corpus meum," "For this is my body") or that praying to Mary and the saints borders on the idolatrous.

The full House must still vote on this matter on the 27th of this month, but there is no real chance that the outcome will change.

In the meantime, perhaps Catholic Republicans will write their congressional leaders to protest what even Henry Hyde regards as an exercise in anti-Catholic bigotry.

Perhaps.

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

Baptism joins us to God's family

The Baptism of the Lord (Jan. 9): (R3) Mark 1:7-11 (R1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7. (R2) Acts 10:34-38.

One day St. Patrick baptized a mountain chieftain. When the chief was lowered into the water, Patrick pressed his crozier down to the river bottom. After the baptism, the chief limped back to shore. Someone explained to Patrick that when he pressed his crozier into the riverbed, he planted it in the foot of the chief. Patrick went to the chief at once and asked, "Why did you not cry out?"

Surprised, the chief answered, "I remember you telling us about the nails in the cross, and I thought my pain was part of my baptism." How often so many of us forget that baptism calls us to share in the cross of Christ.

John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for sins, and all the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside went to him to be baptized. Among them was Jesus from Nazareth.

When Jesus came out of the water the heavens opened and the Spirit, like a dove, descended on him. A voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests."

This was a significant milestone in our Lord's life. Until this time he had worked



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

as a carpenter. When he began his ministry, his family, friends and neighbors were surprised.

At our baptism we never see the heavens open nor hear the voice, yet what happened at Jesus' baptism happens at ours: We become sons of God. Baptism makes us members of God's family.

In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown and Linus are talking. Linus says, "I feel kind of depressed today. Do you ever have the feeling that life has passed you by, Charlie Brown?"

Charlie Brown answers, "Worse than that. Sometimes I think life and I are going in opposite directions!"

Maybe we feel like that sometimes. But we must always remember that we are baptized. We belong to the family of

God. And this was not our own doing. It is by the grace of God that we were elevated to this high station as God's own children. What greater honor can we have in this world or the next?

Baptism also signifies that our sins are forgiven. Water cleanses from dirt; baptismal water cleanses the soul of the foulness of sin.

Catherine of Siena saw a child after its baptism and said, "If I did not know there was but one God, I would have adored that child as God."

Finally, baptism signifies that it is but a beginning for each of us. So many stray away from their baptismal commitment to renounce the devil and his works.

In 1971, a man named Jim Reid moved to Florida. He took up scuba diving. One day he dove into a water hazard at the local golf course. To his amazement he discovered in that tiny lake thousands of golf balls. He recovered them and the course manager offered 10 cents for each ball. Reid said he made almost as much money in one day from the balls as he did all week at his ordinary job.

Soon he quit his job and submerged himself in his new business of golf ball diving. He called it "Second Chance," and in 1994 he sold it for \$5.1 million.

Jim Reid made a good living finding golf balls that others thought were lost and irretrievable. It wasn't always easy work, but it brought him great rewards.

Jim Reid is not the only one who specializes in finding that which is lost. God is the ultimate finder of that which others have marked off as irretrievable. What God finds is not lost golf balls but lost people.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, January 10

1 Samuel 1:1-8; Mark 1:14-20

Tuesday, January 11

1 Samuel 1:9-20; Mark 1:21-28

Wednesday, January 12

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20;

Mark 1:29-39

Thursday, January 13

1 Samuel 4:1-11; Mark 1:40-45

Friday, January 14

1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22; Mark 2:1-12

Saturday, January 15

1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19, 10:1;

Mark 2:13-17

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