

## COLUMNISTS

## Should Congress scrap chaplaincy?

John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 shattered once and for all an unwritten rule that only white male Protestants can become President of the United States.

However, Catholics have not yet overcome an even more durable unwritten rule that only white male Protestants can serve as congressional chaplains.

Father Timothy O'Brien, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, was the first choice of a bipartisan screening committee composed of nine Republicans and nine Democrats.

Yet the Republican leaders of the House, the speaker and the majority leader, rejected the committee's recommendation and chose instead a Presbyterian minister who had been ranked third on the list of three finalists.

House Republicans, including Henry Hyde, the Republican chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, have acknowledged the existence of a strong anti-Catholic bias within their party's Congressional caucus.

One of the party's leading support groups is the Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist religious right, which does not regard Catholicism as an authentic form of Christianity.

The deeper question, however, is whether we ought to have congressional



## essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

chaplains at all. The U.S. Supreme Court addressed this issue in *Marsh vs. Chambers* (1983) where it ruled that the use of a paid chaplain to open each session of the Nebraska state legislature was not in violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause.

Writing for the court, Chief Justice Warren Burger appealed to the nation's 200-year history and concluded that the practice of opening legislative sessions with a prayer had become "a part of the fabric of our society." But is that the end of the argument?

In a recent column in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (12/4/99), historian Garry Wills cites James Madison, the First Amendment's principal drafter, in opposition to the appointment of any chaplains to political bodies on the grounds that reli-

gion is not within the competence of the state.

Madison, in fact, had praised Thomas Jefferson for not issuing Thanksgiving proclamations during his presidency. Madison himself yielded to pressure when he was president, but he later came to regret it and denounced his own action after he had left office.

Wills points out that advocates of prayer in the public schools have logic on their side in saying that it makes no sense to prohibit children from praying as a body to start the school day when the official chaplains of Congress lead the members in prayer at the beginning of each legislative session.

The solution to this inconsistency, Wills argues, is not to restore prayer to the schools but to remove it from Congress.

While the religious right complains that we have gone too far in separating church and state, Madison would argue that we still haven't gone far enough. Wills mentions, by way of example, tax exemptions for religious organizations (some as marginal to "religion" as the Church of Scientology) and the use of the motto, "In God We Trust."

For Madison, religion was too important to be subject to definition by secular

authorities. Wills reminds us that religion has prospered in America to the extent that the nation has observed Madison's principles. Indeed, this is the most religious country in the economically developed world.

According to various Supreme Court opinions, what the First Amendment forbids is any aid by the state to religion, which has as its purpose or primary effect an advancement of religion (*Abington School District vs. Schemp*, 1963), or which "entangles" government with religion (*Walz vs. Tax Commissioner of the City of New York*, 1970), or which has the potential for creating political divisions along religious lines (*Meek vs. Pittenger*, 1975).

In the recent controversy over the House chaplaincy, it seems clear that political divisions were indeed created along religious lines. Father Timothy O'Brien's candidacy was scuttled because a sufficiently large number of Protestant members of the House apparently decided, along religious lines, that a Catholic priest should not be entrusted with this office.

So maybe Garry Wills is right.

♦♦♦

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

## Following Christ means taking risks

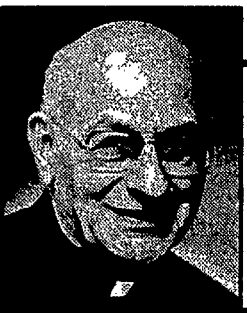
**Second Sunday of the Year (Jan. 16):** (R3) John 1:35-42. (R1) Samuel 3:3-10, 19. (R2) 1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20.

The most rewarding adventure a person can devote him or herself to is that of following Jesus. To follow him, of course, involves a risk. Yet some of the greatest people who ever lived have been risk-takers.

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, long hours..." This ad was placed in the early 1900s by the explorer Ernest Shackleton — he was looking for men to help him discover the South Pole. The ad drew 5,000 brave candidates. Shackleton was once asked, "Why do you want to go to such a forbidding, ice-covered continent?" He paused, then replied, "The fascination of placing the first footmarks."

We can understand that, can't we? Think of the people who have placed footmarks on our history. People, like John Glenn, and Alan Shepard, Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, Christopher Columbus, Galileo, Augustine, St. Peter and St. Paul.

What risk-takers were the followers of Jesus in the first century after his ascension into heaven! They faced the possibility of death daily for their faith. Still,



## a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

they persisted. The Apostles followed Jesus regardless of the odds, the opposition, the danger.

The first Sunday reading tells about a young man named Samuel, perhaps 12 or 13, who gave his life to serving God. As a child, his mother Hannah left him at the Temple to serve the prophet Eli. One night as he lay in his bed, Samuel heard his name called. At first he thought it was Eli. After this happened three times, Eli realized it was God. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if you hear the call again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel did so. And the Lord spoke, saying he was getting ready to do something great for Israel and needed Samuel.

A missionary society wrote to the

great missionary David Livingstone deep in the heart of Africa and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you." Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all." Christ is looking for people who will follow him even if there is no road at all.

*Time* magazine postulates that the reason so many modern people seek out danger is that life today is so safe, so secure. There are so few frontiers left to conquer, so few dangers we have to face. Often they engage in extreme behavior to forget the emptiness within.

Maybe we've made being a Catholic too easy. Maybe we need the opportunity to risk life and limb for Christ. Maybe convenience and easiness have caused our faith to lose its edge.

When the famous film director, Franco Zeffirelli, announced that he was planning to film the life of Christ, film stars offered their services and some traveled thousands of miles to location sites in Tunisia and Morocco.

James Mason journeyed from Switzerland to play Joseph of Arimathea. Rod

Steiger left California to play Pontius Pilate, and Laurence Olivier flew from London to take the role of Nicodemus. Many big stars played in minor roles.

Stars paid a high price in terms of sacrifice to say a few words in a film about Jesus. The world still needs to be saved by men and women willing to be committed to Jesus no matter the cost.

♦♦♦

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

## Daily Readings

Monday, January 17

1 Samuel 15:16-23; Mark 2:18-22

Tuesday, January 18

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Mark 2:23-28

Wednesday, January 19

1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Mark 3:1-6

Thursday, January 20

1 Samuel 18:6-9, 19:1-7; Mark 3:7-12

Friday, January 21

1 Samuel 24:3-21; Mark 3:13-19

Saturday, January 22

2 Samuel 1:1-4, 11-12, 19, 23-27; Mark 3:20-21; Mark 2:13-17

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