

COLUMNISTS

Quality of parish is linked to pastor

When all is said and done, Christianity is not just an idea; it is a way of life. And Jesus Christ is not just a philosopher (*pace* certain presidential candidates); he is the "Way, the Truth, and the Life." Specifically, he shows us the "way" to the "truth" so that we can "live" the truth, not just think and argue about it — or memorize it.

The truth to live is that our love of God must be expressed in and through our love of neighbor (1 John 4:20-21). And who is the neighbor? The despised Samaritan who fell victim to robbers (Luke 10:29-37), the enemy who hates you (Luke 6:27-36), the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, the prisoner (Matthew 25:31-46), the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), the poor man covered with sores (Luke 16:19-31), the persistent widow seeking justice (Luke 18:1-8), the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), the brother or sister who has sinned against you (Matthew 18:21-35).

If Christianity is not just an idea, neither is Catholicism. It, too, is a way of life — proclaimed and celebrated each time a Catholic parish community gathers for the Eucharist. And neither is the Catholic Church an idea. It is a global, multi-cultural community of flesh-and-blood Catholic people that becomes vis-



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

ible, as it were, every time Catholics gather for the celebration of the Eucharist.

And neither is the Eucharist just an idea; it, too, is an event. The Eucharist happens because a faith-community gathers and because certain individuals within that faith-community prepare for the event and give it shape, content, and movement. The most important individual in the eucharistic event, for better or for worse, is the one who presides. While other individuals can take up some of the slack if the presider fails at his job, the quality of the event is severely compromised nonetheless.

In the end, Catholics who are generally happy with the church belong to parishes that have competent, and sometimes even visionary, pastoral leadership, where the weekly celebration of the

Eucharist (readings, homily, music) is done exceptionally well, and where various other pastoral services (care of the sick and dying, ministry to the bereaved, education of the young, outreach to those in need) are competently, compassionately and collaboratively rendered.

But as in the case of the eucharistic celebration, the quality of a parish is tied inextricably to the quality of its pastor.

Paul Wilkes, a prolific writer and experienced observer of the U.S. Catholic scene, recently published a provocative article in the *Boston Globe*, "Must Catholics Settle for Less?" (12/19/99). The article is based on a series of visits he made during the year to various Catholic parishes across the country.

Wilkes claims to have found some of the best Catholic parishes in America, where members "couldn't wait to get to church on Sunday." He discovered them, for example, in a cluster of Minnesota farm communities, in a rejuvenated section of New Orleans, in suburban Chicago, in Boise, Idaho and hard by the Massachusetts Turnpike in Newton.

But they are the exception, not the rule, Wilkes insists. "We've come to accept lifeless liturgies, priests whose best answer is no (or that sure sign of morbidity: 'We've never done that before'),

clueless, noteless sermons that appear to be warmed-over ... memories from a poorly taught New Testament 101 class.

"Rather than being led by men whom we once looked to as inspirational leaders, in too many of our parishes we have priests who are sadly ordinary, men who — had they ended up in any other field — would be seen as second-rate practitioners."

A generation ago, Wilkes writes, there was a different standard. Catholicism was a matter of going to weekly Mass, confession when necessary, devotions if possible, and following the rules laid down by the hierarchy and passed along by the clergy. "In that simpler time, a checkoff list worked reasonably well."

Too many priests today, however, have not made the transition "from the pre-Vatican II cultic priesthood to the Vatican II servant-leader image." As a result, "a new generation of younger Catholics is staying away, quietly declining the inferior goods their parents accept out of obligation or even lingering guilt."

"Must it be this way?" Wilkes asks. "Why are we settling for less?"

Next week: seminaries.

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

Show God's love in words, actions, appearance

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Feb. 27): (R3) Mark 2:18-22. (R1) Hosea 2:16-17, 21-22. (R2) 2 Corinthians 3:1-6.

Do you have a pen pal — someone you write to? St. Paul says we are better than pen pals. We are living letters written by the Spirit ... on tablets that are hearts of flesh.

Christ meant us to be living letters of commendation for our faith. Daily we show to those around us whether God lives in our hearts or not. We can do this: by our confession (what we say), by our conduct (what we do), and by our countenance (how we appear).

Let's begin with our confession — what we say.

When early printers, using hand-set type, received an order to print a collection of Alfred Tennyson's poems, they immediately ordered hundreds of extra letters "L" and "V" for their presses. They knew Tennyson. He used the word "LOVE" so often in his poetry that the average set of type was inadequate.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if each of us spoke so many words of love that anyone making a transcript of our conversation would have to have an abundant supply of the letters "L" and "V"?

Words of love are words of encour-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

agement and praise. Words that make people feel better about themselves and about God. When we encourage others, we are the voice of God. Living letters.

Also, we communicate our love for God by our conduct—what we do.

Several years ago Billy Graham was in India for a crusade. While there, he witnessed to a man about Christ and then asked the man if he would become a Christian. The man answered, "I like what you have said. If I ever see a real Christian I will become one."

In the 1950s, Charles Swindoll served a stint in the Marine Corps. He had the opportunity to visit Japan. Before disembarking, the commander reminded his crew that they were walking into a totally different culture, that their customs

and habits may not be welcome in Japan. It would be imperative to maintain good behavior, he said because, "They know nothing of your homeland except what they see in you." So with us, we might be the only Bible some will ever read.

Finally, our countenance — how we appear — makes us living letters of God.

Just by looking at some people, you can tell that they have had many disappointments. Others look hard. Some, downright mean. You cannot tell a book by its cover, but appearances tell a lot.

Once a little boy wanted to meet God. So he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer and started his journey. Three block from home, he met an old woman sitting in the park, staring at some pigeons. The boy noticed that she looked hungry, and offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. He offered her a root beer. Again she smiled at him. The boy was delighted. They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, yet they never said a word. Before he left, he gave the woman a hug. She gave him her biggest smile ever. When he got home, his mother noticed the look of joy on his face. She asked, "What made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God."

You know what? She's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile the old woman, also radiant with joy, returned to her home. Her neighbor, stunned by the look of peace on her face, asked, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

She replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God. You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Living letters!

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

Daily Readings

Monday, February 28

1 Peter 1:3-9; Mark 10:17-27

Tuesday, February 29

1 Peter 1:10-16; Mark 10:28-31

Wednesday, March 1

1 Peter 1:18-25; Mark 10:32-45

Thursday, March 2

1 Peter 2:2-5, 9-12; Mark 10:46-52

Friday, March 3

1 Peter 4:7-13; Mark 11:11-26

Saturday, March 4

Jude 17, 20-25; Mark 11:27-33

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