

# COLUMNISTS

## Laity has share in priesthood of Christ

This column is late in acknowledging an important pastoral letter on ministry written by Cardinal Roger Mahony in collaboration with the priests of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (*Origins*, 5/4/00). Issued on Holy Thursday, the document arose out of a 1997 assembly of priests, which expressed the need for articulating a clearer vision of ministries, ordained and nonordained, and for preparing parishes for the pastoral challenges of the future.

The document itemizes some of the major changes that have occurred in parish life over the past half-century, particularly the shift in the pastor's role from one of sacramental administration and "plant" management to the fulfilling of a diverse set of ministerial responsibilities collaboratively with others, both lay and religious.

"The parish church," it points out, "is no longer ... the place where people go simply to have their needs met. Rather, the parish is where one and all are challenged to exercise their baptismal calling."

Moreover, "the pastor no longer sees himself as the one called to meet all the needs of the people, but as the one who animates the people of the parish to put their gifts to the service of each other and of the wider church and the world.

"It is not just the ordained but the community as a whole which is called to share



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

in the mission of Christ and the Spirit, to witness to the presence of Christ and the creative activity of the Spirit in the church and in the world."

The priests insisted that, if the church is to meet the new pastoral challenges of the 21st century, what is required is more than a "mere adjustment and small shifts in practice ... What is called for is a major re-orientation in our thinking about ministry as well as in our ministerial practice."

The pastoral letter acknowledges that it took the shortage of priestly and religious vocations to awaken our appreciation of the broadly based shared ministry that exists in the church. This awakening came with a rediscovery of Baptism as the foundational sacrament of ministry and by a clearer recognition that ministry is not just for the ordained.

The Second Vatican Council taught us that ordained and nonordained ministers alike share in priesthood of Christ, with the laity participating in the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king.

"What emerges from the Second Vatican Council," the letter declares, "is a clear theology of the laity rooted in an understanding of the church as the people of God, in the universal call to holiness and in an appreciation of the diversity of the nature of the church both hierarchical and charismatic."

This splendid document also highlights the important distinction between "lay ecclesial ministry" and the general ministry of all the baptized.

General ministry includes the services rendered by the laity for the advancement of the Reign of God through their commitments to marriage and family, as well as in the workplace and in society at large. Lay ecclesial ministry involves a vocation of full- or part-time service in the church, for example, by pastoral associates, directors of religious education, catechists, youth ministers and directors of liturgy.

With many priests wondering whether their own ministerial vocation still has meaning, this pastoral letter insists that, while the priest is himself a member of the people of God, his distinctive role is to an-

imate and coordinate the ministerial gifts and services of the whole parish community, and especially of its ministerial team.

"As head of the community, the priest addresses challenging prophetic words to the community, exercises pastoral ministry of oversight and direction of the charisms of the community, and presides sacramentally as the instrument of Christ's action in the sacraments.

"But in headship, the ordained minister is in the church, not above the church nor apart from the church ... the whole church celebrates the sacraments — head and members."

However, the future of the church's ministries remains shrouded in uncertainty. We are like the disciples who walked along the road to Emmaus, anxious and unsettled. When the Risen Lord joined them, they did not at first recognize him.

Only after the disciples persuaded him to have something to eat did they begin to recognize him, as the Gospel tells us, in the breaking of the bread.

This pastoral letter is itself a kind of breaking of bread — the bread of deep pastoral insight, generously salted with hope and courage.

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

## Eucharist is pledge of eternal life

20th Sunday of the Year (August 20): (R3) John 6:51-58; (R1) Proverbs 9:1-6; (R2) Ephesians 5:15-20.

The first reading next Sunday is from the Book of Wisdom.

Wisdom can mean native intelligence, one's God-given talents. Or it can mean knowledge that comes from study, book knowledge. That can become a snare when we wrongly think that knowledge is the answer to all things. Our universities are crawling with unwise intellectuals, self-assured intolerant thinkers, crucifying Christ in our colleges.

Real wisdom is the ability to use knowledge aright. We say, "Wise up" or "Get wise and stop acting like a fool."

The Jews of Jesus' day had knowledge of his miracles, especially two: multiplying the loaves and fish and walking on water. Yet when he asked them to have faith in him and accept his saying, "I am the bread of life," they all turned their backs on him and walked away.

Knowledge comes from study, but wisdom comes from God. "Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns." These seven columns are the seven sacraments. The one pointed out in the first reading is the Eucharist. "Come,



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!"

Sunday's Gospel is the conclusion of the long discourse on the Eucharist given in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. This chapter is of superlative importance because it supports the Catholic teaching that Christ is really, truly and substantially present in the Eucharist.

Think of this, God prepared his people for this teaching by raining down manna from heaven for 40 years to feed them in the desert and lead them to the Promised Land. This was but a type of the greater bread from heaven which is Christ himself, given to nourish the entire human race on its journey through the desert of this world to the promised

land of heaven.

In the Gospel, Jesus says, "If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Then to leave no doubt of what he meant, Jesus goes on to say, "My flesh is 'real' food and my blood 'real' drink."

This is the pivotal truth of our faith: the real presence of Jesus among us at Mass and in the Blessed Sacrament.

Eating is a necessary act. You eat or you die. Holy Communion is necessary to preserve the life of the soul. To nourish, food must not be looked at and admired, it must be eaten! So with Holy Communion. You must receive the bread of life often, even daily if possible, to have life eternal.

Often we think Holy Communion is our receiving Jesus or embracing him. Actually in Holy Communion Jesus receives us and embraces us.

A child runs to his father. He holds out his arms to embrace his father. But he cannot; his father is too tall. So the father stoops down and picks up his child and hugs him. We run to Christ when we go to Holy Communion, but he rushes to meet us, to pick us up, to embrace us, and to pour into our minds and

hearts his love and his strength to make us one with himself. "The man who feeds on my flesh remains in me, and I in him."

This union with Jesus is a pledge of eternal life. Men in the past looked for a fountain of youth. We have it in Holy Communion. "The man who feeds on this bread shall live forever."

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

### Daily Readings

- Monday, August 21**  
Ezekiel 24:15-24; Matthew 19:16-22
- Tuesday, August 22**  
Ezekiel 28:1-10; Matthew 19:23-30
- Wednesday, August 23**  
Ezekiel 34:1-11; Matthew 20:1-16
- Thursday, August 24**  
Revelation 21:9-14; John 1:45-51
- Friday, August 25**  
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 22:34-40
- Saturday, August 26**  
Ezekiel 43:1-7; Matthew 23:1-12

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