

COLUMNISTS

Church teaching should benefit its lay employees

With the new emphasis on the role of the laity in the ministries of the church, exemplified by Cardinal Roger Mahony's excellent pastoral letter on ecclesial lay ministry published in April, it is all the more urgent that attention be focused now on the manner in which lay ministers are actually treated by the church. The annual observance of Labor Day provides an apt occasion for doing so.

The new archbishop of New York had been criticized for the way in which he responded to complaints against sexual misconduct on the part of his priests in his former Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn. The bishop adopted the legal theory that parish priests were "independent contractors." Neither the bishop nor the diocese were liable for a priest's criminal behavior.

Some clerical wags asked whether, the next time their bishop ordered a transfer from one parish to another, they could tell him, however politely, that as "independent contractors" they had decided not to change their place of work at this time. But thanks anyway for the offer.

There have been occasions when lay employees of the church — directors of religious education, directors of liturgy, youth ministers, and the like — have also been set legally adrift.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

A lay person — more often a woman than a man — signs a parish contract which the pastor proudly assures her is legally binding. There is no mention of any canonical process in the contract, nor is there any disclaimer that the contract is not enforceable in a court of law.

A new pastor is assigned to the parish and it becomes immediately clear that working conditions will no longer be the same. Either the lay minister, whose job description has been radically altered, will voluntarily resign or will be forced to resign — or be fired outright — on grounds of incompatibility or whatever.

An appeal to the terms of one's contract regarding termination is met with defiance, the diocese holding that the contract was unenforceable in a civil court, the only recourse being an appeal

to the bishop — the same man who appointed the new pastor and who shares his theological and pastoral outlook.

But this is only one example of many. Catholic school teachers are told that there is not enough money to provide the level of salaries and benefits that teachers need and have a right to expect in the current economic climate. When the teachers question the reasoning behind the decision to hold firm on expenditures, they are challenged to propose a method by which the necessary funds could be raised.

Because each diocese is an autonomous entity, national policies on social justice or the rights of church employees carry no more than moral authority — which usually means no authority. A national episcopal conference can only recommend; it cannot enforce.

To the great credit of the U.S. Conference of Catholics Bishops, its policy regarding church employees, including many thousands of lay ministers, has been clear and strong.

The church itself is bound by the social teachings it proclaims to others in the political and business communities. Following the lead of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter of 1986, "Economic Justice for All," de-

clared that the church itself "should be exemplary" in this regard (n. 347).

Accordingly, the bishops committed themselves to "the principle that those who serve the church ... should receive a sufficient livelihood and the social benefits provided by responsible employers in our nation" (n. 351).

Moreover, all church institutions must not only recognize the rights of employees to bargain collectively with their church employers; they must also respect the choice their employees make regarding a bargaining agent (n. 353).

The bishops made a particular point of emphasizing the rights of women and warned against any and all forms of discrimination against women in terms of salaries and the appointment to ministerial positions.

Until the church makes the matter of justice-in-the-church one of its highest priorities, it cannot credibly refer to itself as the sacrament of Christ. The principle of sacramentality requires the church to practice what it preaches about social justice and human rights.

Labor Day is a good time to remember that.

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

We speak of love, but is it in our hearts?

22nd Sunday of the Year (Sept 3): (R3) Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; (R1) Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; (R2) James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27.

Our Lord, quoting Isaiah, said, "This people pay me lip service, but their heart is far from me." That would make a good country and western song: "When your lips are one place, but your heart is somewhere else."

Maybe you have listened to Dr. Laura Schlessinger's radio program. Dr. Laura is a popular radio psychologist who is appalled by the culture of moral relativism that has pervaded our society. In her book, *How Could You Do That?*, Dr. Laura tells of a call from a young woman who was living with her fiancé, out of wedlock. The young woman's future mother-in-law was insisting that the woman and her son move closer to her home. The young woman was an Orthodox Jew. So she complained that if she moved closer to her future mother-in-law's home, then she would be too far away from the synagogue. Instead of walking to Sabbath services, she would then have to drive, which would be breaking the Sabbath law. Dr. Laura couldn't get the young woman to understand the inconsistency between observ-



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

ing one tenet of her faith — honoring the Sabbath — but not caring if she violated another — living with her fiancé out of wedlock. It is not unusual for people to espouse one thing and to do something entirely different.

Country music star Willie Nelson, tells the story of an image of Jesus that appeared in 1987 on the wall of a town in South America. People gathered to pray in front of the image, some reported healing from disease. Then, after a heavy rainfall, another face appeared on the wall, that of Julio Iglesias. The people had been praying in front of an old poster, covered over in whitewash, advertising a duet between Julio and Willie Nelson. Tabloids ran a new headline,

"That's not Jesus — it's just old Willie."

People who use religion to whitewash their hearts discover that when the rain of adversity comes, the whitewash fades and people see that it wasn't Jesus after all. It was just old Willie. Religion is the perfect place to hide a heart filled with hate, with doubt, with bitterness.

The word "hypocrite" was used in the theater to mean "one acting a part." In the gospel, Jesus uses "hypocrite" in three situations: when someone acts just to impress others; when someone focuses on the outside of religion and not on the heart; when one has bad motives and covers them up with a lot of religion.

Only when the love we have on our lips matches the love we have in our hearts are we truly blessed.

In 1970, a young hippie couple showed up in a small country church and asked the pastor to marry them. The pastor asked them to attend church the following Sunday. The young couple showed up. When the pastor told the congregation that they were going to get married, the church members organized a wedding luncheon for the young couple.

A middle-aged couple showed up at that church 25 years later. They told the pastor that they had been married there.

At the time, they were a poor, hippie couple, on drugs and alcohol. They were so surprised when the folks in this little church threw them a party for their wedding. Years later, when they were searching for some meaning in their lives, remembering the love and acceptance they found in that church, they began attending a church. Soon they became Christians and cleaned up their lives.

A Christ-like charity changed their lives. Are my lips and heart in alignment?

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

Daily Readings

Monday, September 4

1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Luke 4:16-30

Tuesday, September 5

1 Corinthians 2:10-16; Luke 4:31-37

Wednesday, September 6

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Luke 4:38-44

Thursday, September 7

1 Corinthians 3:18-23; Luke 5:1-11

Friday, September 8

Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30;

Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23, or 1:18-23

Saturday, September 9

1 Corinthians 4:6-15; Luke 6:1-5

COURIER CLASSIFIEDS

GENERAL

Announcements

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