

# COLUMNISTS

## Silence preferable to Bush's inaugural prayers

The eminent Jesuit theologian, Cardinal Avery Dulles, said in an interview with *The New York Times* just prior to receiving the red hat in Rome last month that he has a certain admiration for evangelical Protestants because they "preach the Gospel loud and clear."

"Loud and clear" can also mean "in your face" which, if so, would more likely turn off non-Christians to Jesus Christ rather than draw them to him.

To be sure, the great majority of evangelical Protestants share their faith with others — primarily by the example of their lives — without being overbearing, judgmental, or patronizing.

There are others, however, who seem to look upon non-Christians (for many of them, "non-Christians" includes Catholics) as if they were all plunging headlong into eternal perdition. At best, the presence of non-Christians in America can only be "tolerated," because we are, after all, a "Christian nation."

This is the central concern of an op-ed piece in *The Los Angeles Times* by Alan Dershowitz, Harvard law professor. Mr. Dershowitz is not particularly popular with many Americans who recall his presence on O. J. Simpson's legal team and resent the fact that he helped Simpson evade a guilty verdict. But, of course,



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

everyone has a right to a defense.

Professor Dershowitz's column, published just after the presidential inauguration on January 20, undoubtedly irritated many of his habitual detractors, especially within the evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant communities — and probably a fair number of politically conservative Catholics as well.

Dershowitz vehemently criticized President George W. Bush for having invited Billy Graham's son, Franklin, to offer a pre-inauguration prayer without instructing him to make the prayer inclusive. The Reverend Mr. Graham used "particularistic and parochial language" in dedicating the inauguration to "our savior," Jesus Christ, and by invoking "the Father, the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."

In so doing, Dershowitz pointed out, Mr. Graham "excluded the tens of millions of Americans who are Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Shintoists, Unitarians, agnostics, and atheists from his blessing."

The inauguration ended with another Protestant minister's inviting all who agree that Jesus is "the Christ" to say "Amen," thereby putting non-Christians in the position of denying their own faith or remaining silent while others around them responded — a situation in which non-Christian children are always placed when "voluntary" Christian prayers are recited at school events.

"The plain message conveyed by the new administration," Professor Dershowitz continued, "is that George W. Bush's America is a Christian nation, and that non-Christians are welcome into the tent so long as they agree to accept their status as a tolerated minority rather than as fully equal citizens."

"In effect, Bush is saying: 'This is our home, and in our home we pray to Jesus as our savior. If you want to be a guest in our home, you must accept the way we pray.'"

It may have been acceptable, Dershowitz conceded, for a speaker at Bob Jones University, a private institution, to

tell his audience that America "has no king but Jesus," as the future attorney general, John Ashcroft, did upon receiving an honorary degree there last year, but it is not acceptable at a public inauguration, which all Americans — Christians and non-Christians alike — are invited to attend or to view on television.

Professor Dershowitz cited President George Washington's letter to a tiny Jewish community in Rhode Island assuring them that their presence in the new nation was not simply to be tolerated, as if they enjoyed their constitutional rights "by the indulgence" of the majority. Dershowitz urged President Bush to read that letter and to share it with Mr. Graham (and with anyone else he may invite to offer a prayer at a public event).

It is time for the rest of us — Catholics, mainstream Protestants, and many evangelicals — to make clear that we do not regard this as a Christian nation in any legal or constitutional sense, even if the majority of its citizens are Christian.

If there are to be prayers at public events, they should be inclusive rather than exclusive. Otherwise, a moment of silence will do. Golden silence.

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

## Repentance is an essential element of salvation

3rd Sunday of Lent (March 18): (R3) Luke 13:1-9; (R1) Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15; (R2) 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12.

Sunday's Gospel is an urgent call for repentance. Some told Jesus about Pilate's massacre of some Galileans. They wished to discuss the reasons for the tragedy, to seek some justification of the ways of God toward humanity.

Jesus refused to discuss any of this; instead, he discussed sin and our need to repent, forcing us to talk about our misdeeds, our need to confess and to change.

The call to repentance is at the very center of the preaching of both Jesus and the early church. "I have not come to invite the self-righteous to a change of heart, but sinners." (Luke 5:32)

Repentance is the faithful response to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom. After his resurrection, Jesus commands his disciples to preach to all nations "penance for the remission of sins." (Luke 24:47) Preaching at Athens, Paul said: "God calls on all men everywhere to reform their lives." (Acts 17:30) Repentance is an essential part of the process of salvation.

Repentance involves genuine sorrow for sin against God and radical change in



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

one's relationships with one's neighbor. Remember what repentance was for Zachaeus. Only when the oppressive tax collector turned from his social sins and forsook his unjust oppression did Jesus announce that salvation had come to his house. (Luke 19:9) Repentance is more than a private affair between the individual and God. It is a complete reorientation of one's life in the world.

Lent is a wonderful time to ponder going to confession, the expression of true repentance. I know some may question going to confession to a priest. Yet Jesus laid down the terms for the pardon of sins. To Peter he said, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom. What you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; what you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19) Later he used the same language with all the Apostles, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; what you loose upon earth shall be loosed also in heaven." (Matt. 18:18) Finally on the first Easter night, Jesus appeared to the Apostles and said, "As the Father sent me, I also send you ... whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." (John 20:21-23)

These keys were given only to the officers of the church. Where there are keys, there must be a lock, and what good is a lock if everyone has a key?

Jesus set the terms. He told the blind man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. (John 9:7) If the man hadn't done that, he wouldn't have gotten his sight back. The prophet Eliseus told the leper Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan. Had he not, he would never have been healed. (2 Kings 5:1-14) Saul had to go to Ananias to be healed of his blindness.

God always works through others. And this is especially true regarding the forgiveness of sin. It is a matter of history: Jesus put the forgiveness of sins in the hands of his leaders. Why not go directly to God? For the simple reason that

God told us we must go through his priests. Life comes into the world through parents. Justice is given by the state. So Jesus willed that his graces come to us through the sacraments, including the forgiveness of sin through confession to a priest.

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, March 19**

2 Samuel 7:4-5A, 12-14A, 16; Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22; Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24A or Luke 2:41-51A

**Tuesday, March 20**

Daniel 3:25, 34-43; Matthew 18:21-35

**Wednesday, March 21**

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9; Matthew 5:17-19

**Thursday, March 22**

Jeremiah 7:23-28; Luke 11:14-23

**Friday, March 23**

Hosea 14:2-10; Mark 12:28B-34

**Saturday, March 24**

Hosea 6:1-6; Luke 18:9-14

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