

COLUMNISTS

Apostolic letter sets agenda for next consistory

It is said that Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ("At the Beginning of the New Millennium") will constitute the agenda for the next consistory of cardinals scheduled for May 21-24.

Although the letter is filled with spiritually powerful passages, its length and density almost certainly insure that it will be read by only a relative handful of church members around the world. A somewhat larger number will have seen at least a report or summary of the letter in their diocesan newspaper. But the overwhelming majority of Catholics have probably not even heard of the document.

This is regrettable because there are several items in this apostolic letter, nestled amidst many long and rhetorically robust paragraphs, that suggest a pastoral openness that might come as a surprise to some of the pope's supporters and critics alike.

The pope insists, for example, that the Second Vatican Council was "the great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century" and remains the "sure compass by which we take our bearings in the century now beginning" (n. 57). It is no secret, of course, that among some of the pope's most ardent and, one might say, militant admirers, there is still a certain ambivalence about the worth of that council and its effect upon the life of the church.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

The letter calls upon the church to continue the implementation of Vatican II, not just in word but in action. Those actions, or what the pope calls "pastoral initiatives," cannot be imposed from on high. They must be "adapted to the circumstances of each community" (n. 29).

But the pope surely knows that, for this principle to work, the process of re-centralizing authority in the Vatican over the past two decades will have to be reversed.

The pope's emphasis on the holiness of the church, in keeping with chapter 5 of the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the principle of sacramentality contained in the constitution's very first paragraph, represents a shift away from an older apologetical approach which relied upon biblical proof-texts and theological syllogisms. The church as a

community is required to practice what it preaches. Absent that, its truth claims are empty.

Moreover, the summons to holiness is not directed to clergy and religious alone. Every baptized member is called to "the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (n. 30). Indeed, there is no single type of Christian holiness for all, nor is it only achieved in extraordinary or spiritually exotic ways (n. 31).

In addition, the quest for holiness is not an either-or proposition. It is not a matter of choosing a life of prayer and contemplation or a life of service to others. The one nourishes the other, and both intersect in the liturgy of the church (n. 33), especially the Sunday Eucharist (n. 35).

What is needed, the pope insists, is a spirituality not so much of the individual (that cannot be neglected) but of the faith-community itself, a "spirituality of communion." In practice, it means looking upon our fellow Catholics as brothers and sisters in Christ, not as adversaries to be attacked and disparaged (n. 43).

It also means developing "forums and structures" of communion, in accordance with Vatican II's directives: a renewed papacy, a genuine episcopal collegiality, a reformed Roman Curia, synods, episcopal conferences, pastoral councils, councils of

priests, and meaningful dialogue between pastors and parishioners in whom the Spirit also dwells (nn. 44-45).

The church is, in fact, composed of many different members in many different ministries: "from catechesis to liturgy, from the education of the young to the widest array of charitable works" (n. 46).

In the past many Catholics, including not a few popes, bishops, and pastors, assumed that the way to keep everything together was by the strong hand of authority — everything done "according to the book," — and challenging and punishing those who bent or violated the rules.

It was as if the grandeur of Catholicism lay in its sameness from age to age and place to place. Indeed, that was the motto of one of the church's leading opponents of reform at Vatican II, Cardinal Ottaviani: "*Semper idem*" ("Always the same").

Evidently, that isn't John Paul II's intent. "The unity of the Church," he writes, "is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities" (n. 46).

Which path, however, will the church actually follow: the safe path of uniformity or the more daring path of pluralism and diversity?

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

Christ serves as mediator between God and man

Passion Sunday (April 8): (R3) Luke 22:14-23:56; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-7; (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

Jesus of Nazareth entered Jerusalem riding, not a war horse, symbol of prestige, but a donkey, symbol of servitude. About 1.5 million people were there to celebrate the Passover.

The irony of the Palm Sunday story is how it ends. Jesus is hailed as he parades into Jerusalem. He enters the Temple and then, most curiously, he just looks around. In the afternoon he speaks of the grain of wheat dying and "if I be lifted up, I shall draw all things to myself." Then he leaves the city for Bethany. His day of victory ends with a fizzle instead of a sparkle.

The Palm Sunday parade was not an end in itself, but a prelude to Good Friday. The cross was the moment to which Jesus had pointed his life.

The Good Friday parade held a few days after Palm Sunday was a long trek up a hill called Golgotha — the place of the skull. The Palm Sunday parade smacked of victory. The Good Friday parade smacked of defeat. There were no hosannas. The women who followed Jesus were weeping. The eerie sound of wailing is heard. Faces are grim. The crowds had been given a choice between releasing a



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

terrorist, Barabbas, and releasing their "king," Jesus. They chose Barabbas. How much lower in public esteem can you get than that? If there was any redeeming quality in this second parade, no one could see it.

And yet it was the cross that unlocked the door to heaven for all who would follow Christ.

During the Civil War, a man sat on a park bench in Washington, D.C., crying. His son, under great distress, had deserted his post in battle and was to be shot by a firing squad. The father had come to the capital to see President Lincoln but couldn't get past the front gates.

A little boy paused and asked the man why he was crying. In his emotional distress, he told his story, saying that if he

could talk to the president, he knew his son would be pardoned.

The young boy asked the man to follow him. When they came to the front gate of the White House, the little boy said to the soldiers, "It's all right, he's with me."

The man followed in amazement. They came to the room where President Lincoln was conferring with his generals and cabinet members. The young boy pushed inside and jumped up on the president's lap. The boy said, "Daddy, there's a man I want you to meet. He needs your help."

The man was brought in to talk with the president. His son received a presidential pardon.

The Son of God loved us and through the cross went to his Father and secured pardon for all the sins of the world. And he is now alive to be our mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

An elderly woman asked Ronald Reagan, who became our oldest president, if he had forgotten the old folks. He answered, "How could I forget you? I am one of you!"

No matter how dismal our lot may be, God cannot forget us. Jesus' coming was God's way of saying, "How could I ever forget you? I am one of you."

We can look to Jesus because he was

one of us. He was not just another brave Messiah seeking to lead his people to victory over the oppressive Romans. He is our friend, our helper, our savior who died for us that we might live.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, April 9

Isaiah 42:1-7; John 12:1-11

Tuesday, April 10

Isaiah 49:1-6; John 13:21-33, 36-38

Wednesday, April 11

Isaiah 50:4-9A; Matthew 26:14-25

Thursday, April 12

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; 1

Corinthians 11:23-26;

John 13:1-15

Friday, April 13

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Saturday, April 14

Genesis 1:1-2:2; Genesis 22:1-18;

Exodus 14:15-15:1; Isaiah 54:5-

14; Isaiah 55:1-11; Baruch 3:9-15,

32-4:4; Ezekiel 36:16-17A, 18-28;

Romans 6:3-11; Luke 24:1-12

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