

# COLUMNISTS

## Laity practices ecumenism; church officials lag

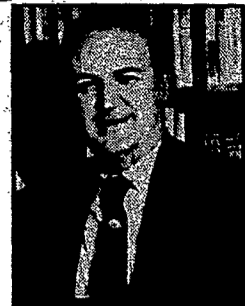
Each year at this time many Christian communities celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU), an idea first proposed in 1908 by Paul Wattson who had been baptized within the Anglican Communion and subsequently entered the Roman Catholic Church.

Father Wattson called his proposed week of prayer a "church unity octave." An octave is a period of eight days including and following a major feast day; it also is the eighth day after the feast.

The original church unity octave was celebrated between the feast of the Chair of St. Peter, Jan. 18 (now Feb. 22) and that of St. Paul on Jan. 25 and was oriented toward encouraging the return of non-Catholic Christians to "the one, true Church" of Rome.

In 1926 the Faith and Order movement of the World Council of Churches (which included Protestant and Orthodox Christians, but not Catholics) had published "Suggestions for an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity," to be celebrated around the feast of Pentecost.

In 1934 Abbé Paul Couturier, an ecumenical pioneer in France, broadened the scope of Wattson's highly Catholic approach by introducing an Annual Prayer for Christian Unity. It was a unity to be achieved "as Christ wishes and by



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

the means which he desires," not necessarily by conversion to Catholicism.

Abbé Couturier had somehow anticipated the shift in ecumenical focus that would be adopted by the Second Vatican Council some 30 years later. In its Decree on Ecumenism the council described the quest for Christian unity not as a matter of a "return" to some pre-existing unity in the Catholic Church, but as a "restoration" of a unity that had been lost (n. 1).

Just prior to the council, however, a common text for the WPCU had been prepared through informal cooperation between the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order division and a Roman Catholic ecumenical agency, *Unité chrétienne*, in Lyons, France.

Following the council, the collaboration became more official. In 1966 the

WPCU became a joint project of the Faith and Order Commission and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The WPCU text has subsequently been developed each year by an international team of Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic liturgists and pastors working from draft materials prepared by various ecumenical groups. The text includes readings from the Bible, centered on a common theme, commentary, prayer intentions for each of the eight days, an ecumenical worship-service, additional prayers and information, and suggested ecumenical activities for use throughout the year.

It has been estimated, perhaps optimistically, that many millions of Christians participate annually in the WPCU observances in some 75 countries.

"Perhaps optimistically" because the formal ecumenical movement, which includes such practices as the WPCU, has tended to languish since Vatican II.

On the one hand, there has been so much ecumenical progress over the past three decades that most mainline Protestants, Anglicans, and Catholics simply take it for granted that they can work and pray together, receive the sacraments occasionally in one another's churches, and

study in one another's seminaries and divinity schools. As far as many rank-and-file Christians are concerned, the ecumenical barriers have already fallen.

On the other hand, ecclesiastical officials, especially within Roman Catholicism and the various Orthodox churches, continue to raise objections to further ecumenical progress in such fundamentally important areas as eucharistic sharing (intercommunion) and the mutual recognition of ordained ministries.

Thus, at the popular level, ecumenism is so vibrant that Christians practice it without even advertent to the fact that they are doing so. At the official level, however, ecumenism has stalled. There have been no major new initiatives since the earliest post-Vatican II years.

Various bilateral consultations were launched with much fanfare immediately after the council, but their generally excellent joint statements and recommendations have not been acted upon, particularly by Roman Catholic and Orthodox bishops.

In the meantime, popular ecumenism continues to move forward with blissful indifference to officialdom's concerns.

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

## World still in need of 'fishers of men'

3rd Sunday of the Year (Jan. 27): (R3) Matthew 4:12-23; (R1) Isaiah 8:23-9:3; (R2) 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17.

Doesn't it amaze you how quickly the disciples left their fishing nets to follow Jesus? Walking by the sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea. Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." They left their nets and followed him. Going on, he saw James and John, sons of Zebedee, in a ship with their father, mending their nets. He called them and they also left the ship and their father and followed Jesus.

Could we not say that these four fishermen acted rather impulsively? Evidently, they were caught up in Jesus' dream. Their impulsiveness suggests certain truths about Jesus.

First, there had to be something very impressive about Jesus for them to act so rapidly. Those four fishermen left their families, their jobs, everything important to them for an uncertain future as disciples of Jesus.

Then, too, there had to have been something special about Jesus' dream. Jesus came preaching "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What was there about that kingdom that got these fishermen



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

so excited? Why are we not just as excited? Maybe we don't understand what the kingdom is. Or maybe it just hasn't been presented very well.

Once a woman read somewhere that dogs were healthier if fed a tablespoon of cod liver oil each day. So each day she chased her dog until she caught it, wrestled it down, and managed to force the fishy remedy down the dog's throat.

One day the bottle got kicked over. To her surprise the dog trotted over to the puddle and began lapping up what had been spilled. The dog loved cod liver oil! It was just the owner's method of application the dog objected to.

Sometimes I think something like that has happened to the good news of the Gospel. It has been so poorly presented

to us that we have never been captured by its attractiveness and its power.

Jesus had a vision for the world, a dream of how life is intended to be. Jesus saw a world of goodness, peace and justice, love, harmony and unity. He said it is not a distant dream, but at hand, if only we would listen to him and follow him.

Finally, the disciples got excited about the role they would play in bringing about the realization of Jesus' dream. Jesus said to them, "I will make you fishers of men." He was calling them to introduce men and women to his kingdom of love, of mercy, of power, of heaven on earth. They would not be passive spectators of this kingdom but active participants. They would make a lasting difference in the world and in the lives of individuals. No wonder they got excited. They were going to help change the world.

When Christians in China were persecuted by the Communists, they displayed extraordinary courage, zeal and love, spreading the Gospel to their neighbors, giving food and clothing to the needy and poor, visiting the bereaved and praying for the sick, often seeing God miraculously heal. The church is still growing in Communist China be-

cause individual Christians did their part to be fishers of men.

The kingdom of heaven is still in this world. Jesus of Nazareth is still looking for co-workers. Can he count on us?

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

### Daily Readings

**Monday, January 28**  
2 Samuel 5:1-7, 10; Psalms 89:20-22, 25-26; Mark 3:22-30

**Tuesday, January 29**  
2 Samuel 6:12B-15, 17-19; Psalms 24:7-10; Mark 3:31-35

**Wednesday, January 30**  
2 Samuel 7:4-17; Psalms 89:4-5, 27-30; Mark 4:1-20

**Thursday, January 31**  
2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29; Psalms 132:1-5, 11-14; Mark 4:21-25

**Friday, February 1**  
2 Samuel 11:1-4A, 5-10A, 13-17; Psalms 51:3-7, 10-11; Mark 4:26-34

**Saturday, February 2**  
Malachi 3:1-4; Psalms 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22-32

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