

COLUMNISTS

Systemic issues beg for strong leadership

The problem of pedophilia in the priesthood cannot be laid at the doorstep of the Archdiocese of Boston alone. As events continue to unfold, that has become increasingly evident. The crisis is national, and even international, in scope.

The question is: What can the leaders of the church do about it?

It should be clear by now that expressions of sorrow and regret, appeals for forgiveness and a firm purpose of amendment — each of which is necessary in itself — constitute an inadequate response. The present crisis in the priesthood is not an isolated problem caused by "a few bad apples," and it will not be resolved simply by taking complaints about sexual misconduct more seriously in the future, by removing accused priests from their pastoral assignments until allegations have been thoroughly investigated, and by tightening seminary admissions procedures to keep pedophiles out of the priesthood.

The pedophilia crisis is part of a much larger systemic and institutional problem, and the crisis cannot effectively be resolved without addressing those basic systemic issues.

To be sure, the reform of the church's methods of recruiting, educating and certifying seminarians for ordination would be a major part of the solution. But there is even more to it than that.

Proponents of the "few-bad-apples"



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

approach are, at least implicitly, defenders of the status quo. With a little more vigilance, they say, the problem can be solved. Pedophiles, after all, are only interested in young boys. Therefore, celibacy can't be part of the problem. But it is.

Because of the Catholic Church's insistence on lifelong celibacy as a condition of ordination and of continuance in priestly ministry, the pool of potential priests within the general population of young Catholic males was always exceedingly small. But it is getting even smaller with every passing year. Indeed, the statistical trends read like a dying person's pulse.

The downward spiral of these past few decades has occurred in spite of assurances from some church officials in the 1970s and '80s that the situation was about to bottom out and that vocations would soon return to their robust 1950s levels. That didn't happen, of course.

There are reasons why it didn't: society's greater openness regarding human sexuality; the rise in the economic status and educational opportunities of many Catholic families along with a broadening of career choices; and the loss of cultural supports for the celibate life. When thousands of priests left the priesthood to marry, thousands more young men began to think twice about embracing a commitment to lifelong celibacy.

The ministry of a parish priest is more difficult now than it was in the golden '50s. He often lives alone in an oversized rectory, a relic of a bygone era, without the support and companionship of other priests. In many dioceses, he is responsible for more than one parish, sometimes having to drive 50-100 miles on a Sunday for Mass at two or three different locations. Burnout, too, often follows.

But celibacy is only one element in a larger network of church regulations and teachings regarding human sexuality and marriage. Many, in fact, view the church's approach as simply one of prohibition. Sexual expression is morally permissible only within the marriage of a man and a woman. But even in such marriages there are stringent limitations, for example, against birth control by artificial means.

Others — rightly or wrongly — see the church's tenacious opposition to both abortion and the ordination of women

as having more to do with the need to control women than with anything else.

When bishops are asked not only by the media but also by their own priests whether they are at least open to a discussion of issues such as these, the bishops usually reply that such matters have already been settled. The counter-cultural church will not tack to the fickle winds of popularity.

And so we return to the proverbial square one. Express regret, seek forgiveness and promise never to let it happen again. And if we all do that, the church will somehow re-emerge stronger than before.

Priests and laity alike know that will not be the case. Much more is needed if the church is to transcend this terrible crisis and become an even more luminous sign and instrument of Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

However, it takes leadership to articulate such a vision, to motivate and inspire people to embrace it, and to provide them with guidance and resources in order to bring that vision to realization.

And that highlights one final piece of the systemic problem: the type of priest appointed to the hierarchy, and the type it excludes even from consideration.

In the end, it's a matter of leadership.

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

God's control enables us to endure trials

Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) (March 24): (R3) Matthew 26:14-27:66; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-7; (R2) Philippians 2:6-11.

Gloria Swanson was one of Hollywood's top actresses from the 1920s to the 1950s. Early in her career, Swanson said, "I have gone through enough of being a nobody. I have decided that when I am a star, I will be every inch and every moment the star! Everybody from the studio gate man to the highest executive will know it." And Swanson made sure of that.

Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the events surrounding his Passion.

Jesus didn't have to arrange that everyone would know he was a star. Word about him had spread throughout the Holy Land. Healer, teacher, leader — he was quite a celebrity as Holy Week began. Too much of a celebrity to suit the entrenched bureaucracy. And so, even as the crowd waved its palm branches and shouted its hosannas, the shadow of a cross loomed in the background.

Can you imagine the emotions that surged in Jesus' heart as he rode the humble donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? He was not fooled by the crowd's adoration. He knew that public opinion is a fickle thing. He knew what lay ahead for him. The crowd that shouted hosanna one moment would shout "crucify him" the next. One of his disciples would betray him, his most trusted would deny him and the three closest to him would not be able to watch one hour with him. Yet Jesus knew his Father was in control, and when God is in control we can endure all things.

Jesus teaches us three things through



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

his suffering and death.

First, he responded to his situation in total faith and trust. He let go of his own will in the garden and sought only his Father's will. A soldier who had spent eight years in a prison camp in Vietnam said he could never have survived that long under such horrible conditions if it weren't for Jesus Christ. On one brutal, exhausting march between prison camps, he said he saw a vision of Jesus. Jesus said to him, "Larry, you'll make it. When I climbed the hill, I had a cross on my back." And he made it.

When we are young and vigorous, we believe we will live forever. We are convinced that anything is possible. As the years pass, we come to see that anything is possible as long as God is in it. Jesus let go of his own will to submit to the will of his Father. Thus, he redeemed the world.

Jesus suffered with the knowledge that his suffering would be a blessing to all others. His suffering was not meaningless. We may not know the reason or the purpose for our heartaches, but we know God can use them for his glory.

It was not easy. Jesus was human; he

hurt just as we hurt sometimes.

A mother was telling her young daughter of the passion and death of Jesus. She explained how they whipped him, forced him to carry a cross, and finally nailed him to it and killed him. The little girl thought for a moment and then asked, "Mommy, why were they so hard on him? Couldn't they have just sent him to his room?" That would have been nice. But Jesus knew what his sufferings could do; they could teach us how much he loved us. They could also teach us that our sufferings also can be redemptive.

Finally, Jesus suffered, convinced that his Father was good and loving. The presence of evil did not make him question his Father's goodness. Evil is very real in this world.

Shirley Nelson says that in her family it was considered proper to hold your feelings in; emotions were a very private thing, not to be shared with others. When Shirley's younger sister died in a tragic accident, the family kept their displays of grief to a minimum. Only once did Shirley's mother give any indication of the inward pain she was experiencing. One day, she remarked, "I'm just thankful nobody can see my insides." But Shirley said that she could see her mother's insides — how the grief weighed her down. God, too, can see it all clearly, and he will help.

When we remember Jesus' submission to his Father, all his sufferings and pain, we, too, can use ours for God's glory.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, March 25

Isaiah 42:1-7; Psalms 27:1-3, 13-14; John 12:1-11

Tuesday, March 26

Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalms 71:1-4A, 5-6AB, 15, 17; John 13:21-33, 36-38

Wednesday, March 27

Isaiah 50:4-9A; Psalms 69:8-10, 21BCD-22, 31, 33-34;

Thursday, March 28

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; Psalms 116:12-13, 15-16BC, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

Friday, March 29

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalms 31:2, 6, 12-13, 15-17, 25; Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9; John 18:1-19:42

Saturday, March 30

- (1) Genesis 1:1-2:2; Psalms 104:1-2A, 5-6, 10, 12-14, 24, 35C
- (2) Genesis 22:1-18; Psalms 16:5, 8-11
- (3) Exodus 14:15-15:1; (Ps) Exodus 15:1-6, 17-18
- (4) Isaiah 54:5-14; Psalms 30:2, 4-6, 11-12A, 13B
- (5) Isaiah 55:1-11; (Ps) Isaiah 12:2-3, 4BCD, 5-6
- (6) Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4; Psalms 19:8-11
- (7) Ezekiel 36:16-17A, 18-28; Psalms 42:3, 5BCD, 43:3-4
- (8) Romans 6:3-11; Psalms 118:1-2, 16AB-17, 22-23
- (9) Matthew 28:1-10

The Catholic Courier again plans to honor couples for their "Milestone" anniversaries.

Those couples who will mark 25, 50, 60, 65, 75, 80 or 85 years of marriage this year, or did earlier this year (2002), may be listed in the annual Milestones/Vocations issue. It will be published April 11.

Please send the following information: Full names of husband and wife; Date of wedding; Church and city where married. Also include a telephone number should questions arise. **Deadline for submissions is Monday, April 1.**



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