

COLUMNISTS

Laity's concern, hierarchy's inaction not new

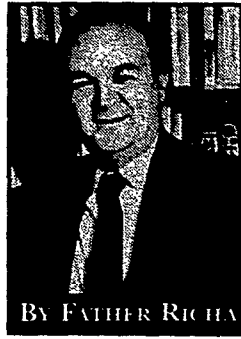
I've had the occasion several times over the past couple of decades to anticipate some aspects of the current crisis in the Catholic Church. Dr. Kern Trembath, a friend and former colleague who manages my Web site (www.richardmcbrien.com), called my attention recently to an essay that I did in August 1990. He thought it could be reproduced today with little or no modification.

The column had been prompted by a scandal involving the director of Covenant House in New York City, who had been accused of sexual misconduct with some of the residents, and another scandal involving sexual abuse at a Catholic orphanage in Newfoundland.

The column began: "It seems self-evident that the reform of any institution ... should be implemented before the reform becomes absolutely necessary — or worse, before it's too late to save a desperate situation.

"For the most part, however, institutions have always had an innate resistance to reform. They rationalize their failure to act by denying that the problem is as great as their critics say it is, or even by denying that the problem exists at all.

"In this regard, institutions often act like ordinary people. We procrastinate ...



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

or we engage in denial ...

"The Catholic Church is not exempt from this institutional syndrome, and nowhere is it more in evidence than in its nonresponse to the growing chorus of concerns and complaints about its clergy.

"We are in a crisis situation, but those in pastoral leadership still refuse to act. Despite increasing evidence that the present system for the recruitment, formation, and selection of priests is in need of a major overhaul, pastoral leaders still have not heeded calls for an immediate ... study of the problem.

"Many Catholics are asking how many scandals will have to erupt before the leadership will finally admit that a very critical problem exists and that it will not go away by denying it, or by prayer and fasting alone.

"The much-publicized pedophilia cases, with their multimillion-dollar lawsuits against the Church, are only the tip of the iceberg."

In Newfoundland, as in some dioceses in the United States, the hierarchy engaged in denial and cover-up. "It was always easier," the column continued, "to disbelieve the charges against the clergy and religious and simply move the individual or individuals to another assignment, where the behavior would resume in a different environment ...

"Not until a lay commission, headed by a former lieutenant governor of the Province, took charge of the investigation and released a scathing report on the situation did anything finally happen."

Having found that the archbishop had lied in at least three cases, the commission "urged the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to 'fully, directly, honestly and without reservation' examine the problems created by the requirement of obligatory celibacy."

What was so significant about the Newfoundland case was the extent of lay involvement in its resolution — a lesson for the U.S. Catholic Church as well.

The laity had become "increasingly alarmed about the declining quality of pastoral leadership, its failure to speak and

act with real moral credibility and its refusal to admit to, much less confront, problems that are two inches from their noses.

"Because they have no vested institutional interest in celibacy as the hierarchy seems to have, these laity draw their own conclusions based not on abstract spiritual appeals, but on their experience as married people and as ordinary, active parishioners.

"References to celibacy as a 'precious jewel' ... are not only meaningless to them, but frightening, because that kind of rhetoric is laden with denials, and signals a refusal even to explore whether a problem exists and to what extent it exists.

"The people have a right to good pastors. The more they realize that the pipeline of good priests is drying up, the more they will demand change."

No one can realistically expect that kind of change to happen quickly, and certainly not without the approval of the Vatican. On the other hand, the old adage about the Catholic Church's moving by centuries rather than by years or months no longer applies.

The church is in a different place now, and there's no going back.

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

Spirit of Pentecost is centered on communication

Pentecost (May 19): (R3) John 20: 19-23; (R1) Acts 2:1-11; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13.

Most of us know the Pentecost story. After the Holy Spirit had come down upon the Apostles, devout people and foreigners from many nations heard the followers of Jesus sharing their testimony about the great acts of God in their own languages. They were amazed, for they knew these testifiers were uneducated, unsophisticated Galileans. And they asked, "How can this be?" Something spectacular, life-changing, world-shaking happened on Pentecost.

First, we see a miracle of communication. People from different nations heard the followers of Jesus speaking in their own tongues. So often preachers and teachers can be guilty of using words that are not understood by their hearers. That is why our Lord used parables and stories so that everyone could understand what he was talking about.

A few years ago, radio broadcaster Mort Crim and his producer were taping a documentary in Cairo, Egypt, not long after Egypt's President Anwar Sadat had been assassinated. They hoped to include an interview with Sadat's widow. The producer made a routine phone call



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

to their station in the U.S. mentioning that he thought they "had a good shot at Mrs. Sadat tomorrow." Within minutes, the Egyptian police were at the door. Evidently, the phones were being tapped by Egyptian security forces. The Egyptians, unfamiliar with American slang, had been alarmed by the comment that they "had a good shot at Sadat's widow." Mort Crim and his producer had some fast explaining to do. We might not know how listeners might interpret what we say. The miracle of Pentecost was, first of all, a miracle of communication.

Even more important, Pentecost was a miracle of connection. The followers of Jesus connected with their audience. Often speakers can go right over the heads of their audience.

If you want to communicate more powerfully, you need first to stop talking. You need to listen to the other person, to walk in his or her shoes. Then when you speak you are not simply mouthing words. You are connecting with another human. As one writer put it: "We seek first to understand, then to be understood." Christ put on our shoes, walked where we walk and built a connection.

There were some who heard the disciples on Pentecost and thought they were drunk. They didn't hear anything at all that was meaningful. And they were probably people who had no difficulty understanding the disciples' words. They simply weren't connected. The miracle of Pentecost was as much about listening as it was about speaking.

Finally, the miracle of Pentecost is about cooperation. Following the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, the disciples were wildly successful in reaching their objectives. New people were added to the church daily. They grew closer, shared all things in common, ate together, prayed, sang and witnessed together.

The flight of Apollo 13 was beset by obstacles. An explosion on board forced a change of plans. The three astronauts pooled their talents to create a solution.

Only with cooperation was the crippled craft able to come back to earth.

The three signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and church can be communication, connection, cooperation.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, May 20

James 3:13-18; Psalms 19:8-10, 15;

Mark 9:14-29

Tuesday, May 21

James 4:1-10; Psalms 55:7-11, 23;

Mark 9:30-37

Wednesday, May 22

James 4:13-17; Psalms 49:2-3, 6-11;

Mark 9:38-40

Thursday, May 23

James 5:1-6; Psalms 49:14-20; Mark

9:41-50

Friday, May 24

James 5:9-12; Psalms 103:1-4, 8-9, 11-

12; Mark 10:1-12

Saturday, May 25

James 5:13-20; Psalms 141:1-3, 8;

Mark 10:13-16

Kids' Chronicle

Answers from page 10:

1. 8, 2. 4, 3. 9, 4. 2, 5. 10,
6. 3, 7. 7, 8. 6, 9. 1, 10. 5

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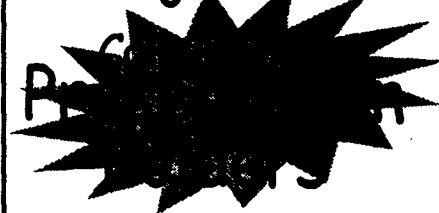
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