

COLUMNISTS

New policy disciplines errant priests, not bishops

It is clear why the U.S. Catholic bishops adopted a more severe zero-tolerance policy than they had originally intended toward priests who have sexually abused minors even once in the past: the pressure of public opinion within the Catholic community itself.

While the bishops had not hesitated previously to adopt unpopular positions on such issues as capital punishment, immigration policy, the Persian Gulf war and abortion, those stands did not provoke as much anger and outrage as their initial reactions to the sex-abuse crisis.

The penitential tone and the underlying ambivalence of the Dallas meeting were evident in Bishop Wilton Gregory's often moving presidential address on June 13.

He began in a sure-footed manner, insisting that the crisis, "perhaps the gravest we have faced," is not a crisis of faith, but a crisis of confidence in the leadership of the bishops. "What we are facing," he said, "is not a breakdown in belief, but a rupture in our relationships as bishops with the faithful."

But the first sign of ambivalence quickly followed. "We did not go far enough," he continued, "to ensure that every child and minor was safe from sexual abuse. Rightfully, the faithful are



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

questioning why we failed to take the necessary steps."

The faithful have not been upset with the bishops because they did not "go far enough" or "failed to take the necessary steps." They have been outraged because some bishops covered up criminal behavior; reassigned known sex abusers, putting more children in harm's way; ignored complaints; intimidated victims and their families by following legal advice rather than the instincts of their own pastoral hearts; stonewalled plaintiffs; and entered into secret, high-priced, out-of-court settlements to protect the reputation of the institutional church.

To Bishop Gregory's credit, he did list some of these same points later on, in his "confession" of episcopal sins. And he added to that a public expression of apol-

ogy and an appeal for forgiveness from the victims of sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, he lapsed once again into implicitly exculpatory language regarding the behavior of the bishops, referring to the "imprudent decisions of a small number (of them) during the past ten years." However, *The Dallas Morning News* had reported that same week that some 111 bishops have at one time or another reassigned known sex abusers.

Since those decisions jeopardized the safety of other young children and minors, they were more than "imprudent" in their moral gravity, and involved more than "a small number" of bishops.

Bishop Gregory appealed to the bishops to be "models of forgiveness to one another." "I believe," he said, "that the grace for us to forgive one another is there."

Of course, people should be forgiven their moral transgressions — even bishops — when they express sorrow for their sins and seek reconciliation with God and with those whom they may have offended or harmed.

But as important as forgiveness is, it only absolves the sin and heals the rupture of fraternal love. It does not address the consequences of one's actions — in this case, those of the bishops themselves.

An executive who jeopardizes his company's financial well-being may be forgiven on a personal level by his board of directors, but they, and the stockholders, would still require the executive to step down for the good of the company.

Finally, while Bishop Gregory spoke positively on *Meet the Press* about the media's role in uncovering this scandal, in his presidential address he complained that "the image of the Catholic hierarchy in this country has been distorted to an extent which I would not have thought possible six months ago."

The use of "distorted" instead of "damaged" set the wrong tone and reflected an underlying ambivalence in the bishop's analysis.

Because the media exposed this scandal, children are safer today than they were as recently as last Christmas.

The measure of ambivalence one detects in Bishop Gregory's otherwise splendid presidential address carried over into the bishops' meeting itself. They dealt firmly — some would say, too harshly — with the problem of predatory priests, but they failed to apply the same zero-tolerance standards to themselves.

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

God's kingdom is the result of his work and ours

15th Sunday of the Year (July 14): (R3) Matthew 13:1-23; (R1) Isaiah 55:10-11; (R2) Romans 8:18-23.

Sunday's parable of the sower and the seed answers a perennial question: "If Christianity is true, why hasn't it worked for 2000 years? It has preached love and still we have hate, wars, violence, terrorism, the direct killing of the innocent unborn and so on and so on."

Our Lord's parable presents a revolutionary concept: The coming of God's kingdom is not his work alone; it is the joint product of God and man: his giving and our receiving, his powerful word (the seed) and our response (the soil).

Thus, Chesterton wrote: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found hard, and not tried."

Water has been around ever since people walked this earth. Still, there are dirty faces and dirty hands. Has water failed?

In our Lord's parable, he lists three obstacles that people can offer to the word of God, to his coming among us. The first can be culture — the footpath of the parable. Culture is the values, priorities and assumptions "worshipped" by a society, something "cultivated" over centuries. It is the footpath made by walking over the same ideas year in and year out — ideas



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

like abortion, premarital sex, pornography. Like any habit, it is hard to break from a culture, to be counterculture.

We try to break through the footpath when we accept Jesus' way of life as the true way. The egoist says, "My way is the right way." The culturist says, "Society's way is the right way." The Christian says, "Jesus is the way." Without him there is no knowing, no going, no living.

The second obstacle is the rocky soil. Often, preaching a sermon is like throwing gravel on a turtle's back. Few words stick. No roots, because we don't think about a sermon.

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one response. Their rule of thumb — keep at it — tell your story, then tell it again, then tell what you've told them, then tell them that you've told them.

The church knows human nature. She's not stupid when she commands weekly Mass and homily. The word must be sown in season and out of season. Our Lord said only such sowing will produce a harvest!

The third obstacle is thorns — busyness! If we reason — in the head — we're doing all right without God, we will have no time for him. The real reasons for not having time for God are moral — in the heart.

When the heart is not right with God, worshipping in a Christian community whose ideals are with God becomes an irritant. Eventually, one leaves the church. The best way to uproot the thorns is by mortification. At Medjugorje, our Lady asked for fasting, at least one day a week. To deny water to the thorns will soon cause the thorns to disappear.

The parable was not meant to stress the obstacles to God's word. The point was that despite obstacles, God's word will produce an abundant harvest — thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

So our Lord tells us not to get discouraged. Don't think evil is winning.

Our Lady said at Medjugorje, "In the end my Immaculate Heart will triumph." Sow the seed — be good, do good, follow the Lord — we and he will triumph. Never cease to strive, in the end good will triumph — thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 15

Isaiah 1:10-17; Psalms 50:8-9, 16-17, 21, 23; Matthew 10:34-11:1

Tuesday, July 16

Isaiah 7:1-9; Psalms 48:2-8; Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday, July 17

Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16; Psalms 94:5-10, 14-15; Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday, July 18

Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19; Psalms 102:13-21; Matthew 11:28-30

Friday, July 19

Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8; (Ps) Isaiah 38:10-12, 16; Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday, July 20

Micah 2:1-5; Psalms 10:1-4, 7-8, 14; Matthew 12:14-21

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