

COLUMNISTS

Church's historical challenges present today

Long after the memories of the recent meeting of the U.S. bishops in Dallas have faded, the Catholic Church will be addressing the same kinds of pastoral challenges that it has been confronting since its founding 2,000 years ago.

The church is the community of those who believe Jesus Christ to be the Lord of history and the redeemer of his disciples, or followers. It strives to incorporate and embody his values and his vision so that the lives of each can become conformed more perfectly to his.

This means that the church must constantly seek to instill in its members the virtues of love, justice, mercy, forgiveness and self-sacrifice. That is why the church has produced, out of its own limited resources, so many schools, hospitals, orphanages, homeless shelters and organizations to bring aid to the poor, the sick and the troubled.

The church recognizes that its place is always at the side of and in the service of people who are in need. It is called by its founder to be a peacemaker, a reconciler, a healer, a renewer, a beacon of hope.

Beyond its social responsibilities, the church has an abiding obligation to continue Christ's worship of God, the Creator of all that is. Indeed, the Second Vat-



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

ican Council referred to the church's liturgy as the summit and the source of the whole Christian life (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, n. 10).

Nothing is more central to the church's life and mission, therefore, than the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, or great act of thanksgiving, the church returns, like the tenth leper who had been cured by Jesus (Luke 17:11-19), to give thanks to God in the name of all humanity.

It is the church's mission to sanctify life's major moments: birth (baptism), one's coming of age and the taking up of one's responsibilities in life (confirmation), the forging of lifetime relationships rooted in love (matrimony), the recognition of one's own failings and the experience of forgiveness (reconciliation), serious illness and the onset of death (anointing of the

sick) and the dedication of one's life to the service of the church (holy orders).

But at the heart of the church's sacramental life is always the Eucharist. It is in the gathering of the community for worship that the church becomes most clearly visible to itself and to those outside. Through the Eucharist, the church "happens."

The church is seen there as an assembly, a community "called forth" (the root meaning of the word "church"). Beyond that, it is a community that is richly diverse not only in the social and cultural identity of its members but also in the functions that are performed.

At Mass, lectors proclaim the Word of God, others are eucharistic ministers, others lead the community in song, others serve at the altar, others welcome the members of the congregation as they arrive for worship, others preside and still others directly assist the presider.

The universal church, like the local congregation at worship, is multifaceted. It consists of all kinds of people doing all kinds of things, not only for one another inside the church, but also for those outside — indeed, for anyone and everyone who may be in need.

The church is a community of faith. It believes Jesus Christ is the savior of the

world. It shapes its whole life and thinking around that fundamental conviction.

Because of this faith, the church is also a community of hope. It believes that, because Christ redeemed us through his life, ministry, death and resurrection, we have reason to hope that we are heirs now of eternal life itself.

Finally, the church gives witness to its faith and evidence of its hope in its manifestation of love for others.

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World put this succinctly: "It is the Father's will that we should recognize Christ our brother in the persons of all men and women and should love them with an active love, in word and deed, thus bearing witness to the truth; and it is his will that we should share with others the mystery of his heavenly love.

"In this way people all over the world will awaken to a lively hope, the gift of the Holy Spirit, that they will one day be admitted to the heaven of surpassing peace and happiness in their homeland radiant with the glory of the Lord" (n. 93).

In the end, this is what the church is all about.

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

The kingdom of God — a treasure awaiting discovery

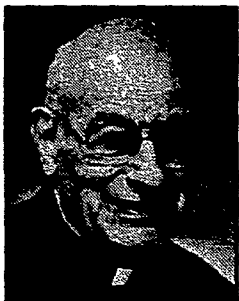
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 28): (R3) Matthew 13:44-52; (R1) 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; (R2) Romans 8:28-30.

In Jesus' day people dreamed of finding treasure buried in a field. Commerce and banking were not as sophisticated as they are today. So people who wanted to secure their wealth would bury it in the ground. Unfortunately, some of these people died before reclaiming their wealth. So there it lay just waiting for someone to discover it.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone stumbled upon. In order to secure his new-found wealth, the lucky finder hid the treasure all over again in that same field. Then, joyfully, he took everything he had and sold it to buy the field. Then the treasure was his. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a buried treasure or a pearl of great price.

Notice, first of all, that this treasure is just waiting to be discovered.

In west Texas, there is a famous oil field known as the Yates Pool. During the Depression, it was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Yates was not able to make enough money on his ranch to pay his mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. His family,



By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

like many others, had to live on a government subsidy.

One day a crew from an oil company came into the area and told Mr. Yates that there might be oil on this land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease. At a little more than one thousand feet, they struck a huge oil reserve, giving eighty thousand barrels a day. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, Mr. Yates' wells showed that they could produce more than one hundred thousand barrels of oil a day.

And Mr. Yates owned it all. For years he did not know the oil was there. He owned it, but he did not possess it.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is something like that. You and I have it within our grasp. It is waiting to be dis-

covered. But many of us are living impoverished lives — not knowing that the kingdom is ours if we want it.

Secondly, note that this treasure brings the finder great joy. How would you feel if you won the million-dollar lottery? Well, that is how one feels who receives the kingdom of God into one's life. For where God is, there is life. Where God is, there is love. Where God is, there is joy. The treasure of the kingdom is available here and now — just waiting to be discovered. Appropriating that treasure brings us great joy.

Finally, the kingdom of God is ours if we are willing to give everything we have to purchase it.

Where we have no investment, we have no concern. God asks each of us to make an investment of our lives and our possessions. God asks us to take everything we are, everything we own, everything we hope to own and offer it to God. If we acknowledge that all we have and all we are belongs to God, including the very life that courses through our bodies, then, in exchange for that level of commitment, God gives us a treasure greater than the Yates oil field. It is a gift that money can't buy. It is the gift of unassailable joy. And it is waiting for any-

one who would receive it.

The kingdom is here, available. All we have to do is claim it. All we have to do is let God reign in our hearts. If we do that, then we will discover a joy that the world cannot know.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, July 29

Jeremiah 13:1-11; (Ps) Daniel 32:18-21; John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Tuesday, July 30

Jeremiah 14:17-22; Psalms 79:8-9, 11, 13; Matthew 13:36-43

Wednesday, July 31

Jeremiah 15:10, 16-21; Psalms 59:2-4, 10-11, 17-18; Matthew 13:44-46

Thursday, August 1

Jeremiah 18:1-6; Psalms 146:1-6; Matthew 13:47-53

Friday, August 2

Jeremiah 26:1-9; Psalms 69:5, 8-10, 14; Matthew 13:54-58

Saturday, August 3

Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24; Psalms 69:15-16, 20-21; Matthew 14:1-12

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