

COLUMNISTS

Scandal focuses attention on bishops' role

The sexual-abuse crisis that has afflicted the Catholic Church throughout this calendar year has focused renewed attention on the office of bishop. The crisis itself has been accurately characterized as a crisis of confidence and trust in the hierarchical leadership of the church rather than a crisis of faith.

The hierarchy is the collective term for the church's body of bishops. There are two types of bishops. Diocesan bishops (ordinaries) exercise pastoral authority or supervision over a portion of the church, a diocese. (The Greek for bishop is *episkopos*, which means "overseer").

Titular bishops do not have direct pastoral responsibility for a diocese. They include auxiliary and coadjutor bishops who assist the diocesan bishop.

The fact that titular bishops hold title to an ancient diocese that no longer exists is an indication of the church's uneasiness about making someone a bishop without a diocese to shepherd. The office of bishop is a ministry, not a reward or status symbol. The rite of ordination makes clear that the "title of bishop is one not of honor but of function."

Accordingly, when a church bureaucrat is made a bishop (the pope's secretary, Stanislaw Dziwicz, is one of many examples in the Vatican), he is ordained



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

with the title of some defunct diocese in North Africa or the Middle East, long since overrun by Muslims or literally by the sands of time. The fiction is thereby maintained that all bishops are committed in principle to the pastoral care of a local church.

It is not easy to identify bishops in the New Testament. The term *episkopos* seems interchangeable with *presbyteros*, or elder, as in Acts of the Apostles 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:2, 5:17; Titus 1:5; and 1 Peter 5:1-3.

In some local churches the elders seem to have formed ruling councils, as in Judaism, and designated one of their own as a kind of council president, with various supervisory responsibilities.

Indeed, the supervisor's, or bishop's, role as presider at the Eucharist was so

important during the first centuries that when a presbyter (the comparable term today is "priest") presided at the Sunday Eucharist, a piece of the eucharistic bread that had been consecrated by the bishop was dropped into the chalice.

As the church grew, it became impossible for each individual bishop to preside over every Eucharist in his own local community, or diocese, so the presbyters increasingly assumed this function.

In the Western church nowadays the only function specifically reserved to the bishop is that of ordination to the priesthood and the diaconate, as well as to the episcopate itself.

In the early church — and for most of the first Christian millennium — bishops were never transferred from one diocese to another. Bishops were to remain in the pastoral service of the local church for which they were ordained. The relationship was especially spousal in character.

The Council of Nicaea (325) explicitly forbade transfers from diocese to diocese, a prohibition reaffirmed by the Council of Chalcedon (451), whose language was especially pointed: "... the ordination of those ordained without title is null ..." (canon 6).

This became a celebrated issue in one of the most notorious events in the entire

history of the church, namely, the so-called cadaver synod of 897 in which the body of Pope Formosus was exhumed from its grave, vested in full pontificals and put on trial for various crimes, including that of accepting election as Bishop of Rome while already serving as bishop of the diocese of Porto.

Formosus was found "guilty," and his official papal acts and ordinations were declared retroactively null and void. Three fingers of his right hand (by which he had sworn oaths and given blessings) were cut off, and he was reburied in a common grave, then dug up again and thrown into the Tiber River.

One final point: Bishops were never regarded as bishops unto themselves. Episcopal ordination introduces one into a college of bishops where they are bound together communally, as in a national conference of bishops.

It is simply bad theology, therefore, to regard bishops as kings in their own dioceses, subject only to the pope.

Unfortunately, it was this same bad theology that dissuaded U.S. bishops from adopting a national sexual-abuse policy in 1985 — to their belated regret.

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

Trust the God of miracles to transform little into much

18th Sunday of the Year (August 4): (R3) Matthew 14:13-21; (R1) Isaiah 55:1-3; (R2) Romans 8:35, 37-39

A few years ago a third-grader wanted to help the hungry in his city. So he started Hams for the Hungry. Believe it or not, that program has been raising thousands of dollars yearly for needy people.

Sunday's Gospel story is about a lad who offered to Jesus what little he had — five loaves and two fish. And thousands of hungry people were fed.

The disciples thought Jesus was over his head when he set out to feed a multitude of 5,000 men and perhaps a greater number of women and children with only five loaves and two fish.

What counts most in life is to realize that with God things can be done that reasonable persons will say cannot be done.

There are always people focusing on their problems, not on the possibilities.

Did Jesus ask his disciples what they had to work with? No! Did he ask them if any of them had any experience in the catering business? No! Jesus knew that no task undertaken at God's command is impossible. He promised bread from heaven. He asked his followers to make disciples of all nations. Nothing is im-



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

possible to God. With five loaves and two fish, he fed 5,000 men besides the women and children.

The point of this story is — trust God. God is a God of miracles. God can take a very little and make it into much. If God commands it, then God can accomplish it.

In the late 1920s, Bert Webb, a pioneer preacher in Minnesota, got word that an elderly Civil War veteran, Colonel Trumble, wanted to see him. Webb traveled 30 miles to the bedside of the old soldier. "I'm not going to make it, preacher," the colonel said, "and I want to tell someone about a miracle I experienced during the Civil War."

In feeble tones the man told of being one of the many Union soldiers incar-

cerated at the infamous Andersonville, Georgia, prisoner-of-war camp, where men died by the hundreds.

Food was scarce, the colonel recalled, but even worse was the scarcity of water. In desperation they prayed to God for help. In a few minutes a huge black cloud stood above the stockade. Suddenly, a brilliant flash of lightning burst out from the cloud, striking a huge rock and splitting it apart. A stream began to gush out and continued to flow.

Webb prayed with the dying man and returned home. But he wondered if perhaps the story was just a figment of the imagination of a dying soldier. So for five years he kept the story to himself.

In 1935, speaking in Columbus, Georgia, on "The Water of Life," Webb suddenly felt impelled to tell the story. After the service, people swarmed around him. "We know about that spring," they said. "The site of Andersonville is just a few miles from here. The story is true."

Webb went with friends to the site. There in the center of the former camp was the spring with a stone house covering the rock from which water issued. Above the door was a sign that read Providence Spring, commemorating the miracle that had produced it.

God is a God of miracles. God can provide for our needs. God can help us accomplish our dreams. God can take our little and turn it into much. He wants to. We must trust him.

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

Daily Readings

- Monday, August 5**
Jeremiah 28:1-17; Psalms 119:29, 43, 79-80, 95, 102; Matthew 24:22-36
- Tuesday, August 6**
Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalms 97:1-2, 5-6, 9; 2 Peter 1:16-19; Matthew 17:1-9
- Wednesday, August 7**
Jeremiah 31:1-7; (Ps)
Jeremiah 31:10-13; Matthew 15:21-28
- Thursday, August 8**
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalms 51:12-15, 18-19; Matthew 16:13-23
- Friday, August 9**
Nahum 2:1, 3, 3:1-3, 6-7; (Ps)
Deuteronomy 32:35-36, 39-41;
Matthew 16:24-28
- Saturday, August 10**
2 Corinthians 9:6-10; Psalms 112:1-2, 5-9; John 12:24-26

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