

COLUMNISTS

Clergy, laity elected bishops for centuries

Most Catholics assume that only the pope can appoint a priest to the hierarchy, or transfer a bishop, or accept his resignation. These developments, however, are relatively late — as late as the 19th century.

From the very beginning of the church's history, pastoral leaders were elected by the laity and clergy of the various local churches or dioceses. This included the Bishop of Rome, the pope.

How did the communities decide? Did members of the local church present themselves as candidates? Was there a kind of political campaign, after which a formal election would take place?

There is so little that we know about the organizational structures of the church in those earliest years. We do know that the faith communities were small by today's standards, and we can perhaps assume that its members who had an evident capacity for spiritual leadership were easily recognized.

It was a matter of discerning which of these potential leaders seemed to have the requisite gifts of the Holy Spirit. The choice was never infallible — even a good process can produce unworthy bishops.

As the church grew in numbers and began to spread beyond its original urban settings, the need inevitably arose for a more sophisticated organizational



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

model. Some have suggested that the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) represented an intermediate stage between a pluralistic and adaptable church order and the more settled structure we find in St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), from whom we derive the notion of three-tiered holy orders: deacons, priests (presbyters) and bishops.

Indeed, with Ignatius emerged the structure that is still operative. Although we are accustomed to think of it as "apostolic," that is not exactly the case. Its origins are in the early second century.

Not until the middle of that century was there a monoepiscopal structure in the church of Rome, that is, with a single bishop in charge. Before that, Rome was governed by councils of presbyter-bishops (or whatever they may have been called),

with one of their number functioning as chair of the council. Tradition regards those "chairs" as the first successors of Peter, and, therefore, the earliest popes.

By the third century the monoepiscopal structure had increasingly taken hold throughout the church. The bishop became an even more important and powerful figure. The best of them, however, never acted without consultation with their clergy and laity.

St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) insisted that he made no important pastoral decisions "without [the] advice and consent of the people," and that he never ordained anyone to the priesthood without consulting his deacons and presbyters.

Cyprian also offered some of the most explicit and extensive testimony about elections in the early church. His biographer pointed out that Cyprian himself was chosen bishop "by the judgment of God and the favor of the people."

"It comes from divine authority," Cyprian wrote, "that a bishop be chosen in the presence of the people before the eyes of all and that he be approved as worthy and fit by public judgment and testimony."

By the time of the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea (325), differences began to surface between the

practices of the church in the West and in the East. In the West (especially Italy, Gaul and to some extent North Africa) the will and voice of the people remained normative in the selection of pastoral leadership.

In the East, however, after the Roman Emperor moved his headquarters to Constantinople, power gradually shifted from the people to the bishops of the province and to the metropolitan bishop (the key bishop of the region), reflecting the organizational patterns of the empire itself. Nevertheless, St. Athanasius succeeded to the see of Alexandria in 328 "by the suffrage of all the people" (his own words).

Political forces eventually brought about an unholy coalescence of church and state. The emperor and his imperial court were determined to control such powerful figures as bishops, who, in turn, became the equivalent of secular princes.

In the West, popular selection of bishops remained in force for a longer time. Pope Leo the Great (440-61) is the source of the classic principle, "He who is to preside over all must be elected by all." That norm, unfortunately, has been more honored in the breach than in the practice.

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

To overcome fear and 'walk on water,' trust in Christ

19th Sunday of the Year (August 11): (R3) Matthew 14:22-33; (R1) 1 Kings 19:9, 11-13; (R2) Romans 9:1-5.

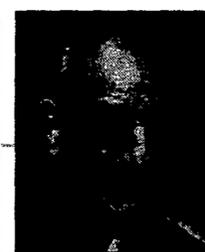
People cannot walk on water. Some sports fans may argue with that. Superstar coaches like Bobby Knight of Indiana and the late Bear Bryant of Alabama have had this ability attributed to them. Some politicians, like Lyndon Johnson, have also been described with this power. Where was the president last night? He was out taking a stroll on the Potomac.

A lieutenant under General Patton's command was asked if he believed Patton could walk on water. He replied, "If he had to walk on water, he'd figure out a way."

Ordinary people can't walk on water. But Jesus was no ordinary man. He walked on water to show us that he could have a great effect on the lives of those who trust in him.

In Sunday's Gospel, our Lord's disciples are out in a boat. A storm comes up rather suddenly and unexpectedly. The disciples are afraid. This is a critical element of the story: Jesus comes to us when we are troubled and feeling helpless. Fear is a terrible thing.

A huckster went from town to town with a huge rattlesnake in a glass cage. The man would cover the glass with a



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

blanket and take it into a saloon. Then he bet the people that the toughest, bravest man in town would not be able to hold his hand against the glass with out jerking it back when the rattlesnake struck.

The townspeople told the man they thought was the bravest, toughest man in town about the bet. Having everyone choose him made it impossible for the guy to resist the challenge. So he went to the saloon where all the folks bet on him.

After all the bets were taken, the huckster tore the blanket off to reveal the biggest, most menacing, evil-eyed reptile ever seen by man. Annoyed by the light and the noise, the snake coiled to strike, his rattles buzzing nervously.

Slowly, the man inched his hand toward the glass and finally touched it. The

snake struck with fury. Instinctively, the man jerked his hand away. A stunned silence fell over the saloon. No one could believe it. The man looked around in humiliation, then stormed from the saloon. The huckster collected his money and moved to another town to repeat the scene and, once again, win the bet.

The threat of that reptile striking through the invisible glass was a fearsome thing. The huckster knew there was nothing to fear except fear itself, and he played on that fear to make his living.

We are a fearful people — fearful of crime, of losing our jobs, of AIDS. We need to know that at those times when our hearts are troubled and we feel most helpless that Christ comes to us. He comes across the troubled water and says to us, "Do not be afraid, it is I." And he beckons us to leave the security of the boat and walk on the water.

I don't know what walking on the water would be for you. For Elizabeth Blackwell, it was becoming a doctor in the 1840s when it was unheard of for a woman to go to medical school. She persisted, graduated at the head of her class and opened a medical school to train women. She got out of the boat and walked on the water.

Never let fear defeat you. For we have a friend who comes to us in our hours of greatest need and says, "Don't be afraid, you can do it. Just step out of the boat and walk on the water with me."

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

Daily Readings

Monday, August 12
Ezekiel 1:2-5, 24-28C; Psalms 148:1-2, 11-14; Matthew 17:22-27

Tuesday, August 13
Ezekiel 2:8-3:4; Psalms 119:14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131; Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

Wednesday, August 14
Ezekiel 9:1-7, 10:18-22; Psalms 113:1-6; Matthew 18:15-20

Thursday, August 15
Revelation 11:19A, 12:1-6A, 10AB; Psalms 45:10BC, 11-12AB, 16; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

Friday, August 16
Ezekiel 16:1-15, 60, 63 or 16:59-63; (Ps) Isaiah 12:2-6; Matthew 19:3-12

Saturday, August 17
Ezekiel 18:1-10, 13B, 30-32; Psalms 51:12-15; Matthew 19:13-15

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