

COLUMNISTS

Local involvement possible in selecting bishops

Many Catholics would raise objections against proposals to elect their bishops. The objections are reducible to two: one theological, the other practical.

According to the first, Jesus established the church in such a way that only the pope, successor of St. Peter, has the authority to appoint bishops. To introduce a system of popular election would contradict the very will of Christ.

The practical objection assumes that no electoral system would be workable. The church is too big and too diverse. Would those who are Catholic in name only have as much voice in the selection of bishops as faithful churchgoers? How could any system be devised that would be at once representative and discriminating?

The theological objection is contradicted by both the New Testament and church history. There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Jesus ever said, much less commanded, anything about the manner by which ecclesiastical authority is to be conferred. If we are to take the biblical texts at face value, the word "bishop" never crossed his lips.

The late, highly respected New Testament scholar, Father Raymond Brown, always insisted that Jesus left no "ecclesiastical blueprint" for the church to follow.

To be sure, he did leave the church the



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Eucharist, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Lord's Prayer, the call to discipleship, the mandate to love and forgive one another without limit and the insistence that all ministry be an expression of service, never domination.

Jesus left most else to the pastoral judgment of the Apostles and their successors, confident in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide the community of his disciples until the end of history.

As for the practical objection, it is the present system, which denies any effective role for the laity and clergy, that is without deep historical roots. For most of the first Christian millennium, bishops were elected by the laity and clergy of the diocese in which they would serve.

Temporal rulers inserted themselves into the process by the middle of the first

millennium, reserving the right to permit an elected bishop to be consecrated and to participate in the ritual of investiture. The Byzantine emperor made this claim regarding the consecration of a new pope.

The involvement of lay officials in the appointment and promotion of bishops grew in the latter part of the millennium as bishops themselves became more deeply involved in secular politics and in the administration of great properties and of powerful secular jurisdictions.

The Gregorian reform movement of the 11th century tried to restore the role of the clergy and laity in the selection of bishops, but was unsuccessful. The pope and high-ranking temporal rulers dominated the process in varying degrees until the early 19th century. Thereafter, the pope made most of the appointments.

If the Roman Catholic Church were to adopt a new system for selecting its bishops, it could learn much from the experience of other Christian churches, and especially from the churches of the Anglican Communion, which has always preserved the tripartite structure of Holy Orders: bishops, priests and deacons.

A screening and selection committee, a standing committee, might be established as a first and simplified stage of reform with its membership drawn from

the diocesan pastoral council, which is supposed to be representative of the clergy, religious and laity of the diocese.

The committee would normally be better informed about the needs of the diocese than most other groups, with the exception of the presbyteral council. It would have full information about those under consideration for bishop and would be required to consult as widely as possible throughout the diocese, but not only on a one-to-one basis.

Public discussions would be essential to raise the consciousness of the wider Catholic public, to increase the likelihood of developing a consensus about the needs of the diocese and the suitability of candidates, and to preserve the process itself from undue secrecy.

Few people would actually favor a process in which every baptized Catholic within a diocese could vote for a new bishop. The question of active vs. inactive Catholic would legitimately arise, and so, too, would the concern about political-style campaigning that relies heavily on advertising and media sound-bites.

Any system that increases participation would be better than the present one.

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

Having Christ in our lives makes us better people

21st Sunday of the Year (August 25): (R3) Matthew 16:13-20; (R1) Isaiah 22:19-23; (R2) Romans 11:33-36.

In the 1980 Olympics, an American athlete named Eric Heiden took all five gold medals and set five new Olympic speed records for men's speed skating. Heiden was recognized as the greatest men's speed skater who had ever lived. No one could beat him in speed skating.

Now, you would think that such knowledge would demoralize and deflate people who had to compete against Heiden. Just the opposite proved true. Even though they knew they couldn't beat him, skaters knew that skating against him would bring out the best in them.

For instance, when Heiden won the 500-meter race, second-place honors went to Eugeni Kulikov of the USSR, who turned in his personal fastest time for 500 meters. When Heiden won the 1000-meter race, the runner-up was Gaetan Boucher of Canada, who clocked his personal fastest time in the 1000 meter.

In every race, the silver and bronze medalists who lost to Heiden achieved greater personal speeds than ever before, simply because they were doing their best to be his equals. This phenomenon became known as the "Hei-



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

den Effect" — achieving personal victories by striving to equal a competitor one knows he can never equal or surpass.

The Heiden Effect sounds something like our relationship with Jesus. We can never be his equal, but simply being in his presence makes us better people.

When Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

That's the perennial question. Who is Jesus to you?

Does Jesus really care what is happening to each of us? Of course he does. The sun that wakens the world each morn-

ing, the food that graces our tables, the people who care for us, the beauty of creation and all the other many blessings we might enumerate — all are evidences of God's great love for each one of us.

Nor has Jesus left us to fend for ourselves. He sends angels into our lives. They're simply friends, family members, colleagues at work, sometimes even complete strangers. Sometimes we thwart God's efforts because we isolate ourselves from others and try to go it alone. Sometimes God needs us to be angels to someone else. So often God uses us or someone else to lend a helping hand.

As the hymn put it: "Sometimes He calms the storm. He can settle any sea, but that doesn't mean He will. Sometimes He holds us close and lets the wind and waves go wild. Sometimes He calms the storm, and other times He calms His child."

Remember, Christ will always be with us whatever life, or death, may bring.

In the movie "Titanic," Rose stands on the edge of the great ocean liner, about to commit suicide. Jack Dawson, a penniless artist, talks her back from the edge. He grabs her hand and promises, "I will never let you go."

The theme reasserts itself throughout the movie. When the ship sinks, Rose

survives but Jack, in the frigid water at her side, dies — still holding her hand — even in death.

Surely, that is what we believe about Christ. He cares what happens to us. He holds our hands and will never let go.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, August 26

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11B-12; Psalms 96:1-5; Matthew 23:13-22

Tuesday, August 27

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3A, 14-17; Psalms 96:10-13; Matthew 23:23-26

Wednesday, August 28

2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18; Psalms 128:1-2, 4-5; Matthew 23:27-32

Thursday, August 29

1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalms 145:2-7; Mark 6:17-29

Friday, August 30

1 Corinthians 1:17-25; Psalms 33:1-2, 4-5, 10-11; Matthew 25:1-13

Saturday, August 31

1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Psalms 33:12-13, 18-21; Matthew 25:14-30

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