

COLUMNISTS

Accepting all popes' teachings won't solve crisis

Some have argued that the root cause of the sexual-abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is the "culture of dissent" within the church. The underlying assumption is that, if only Catholics had accepted everything the pope teaches, there would be no problem.

But this begs at least two questions: (1) Which pope? and (2) Which teachings?

One has the impression that at least a few commentators are not referring to popes in general, but only to the current pope, John Paul II. Indeed, his authorized biographer, George Weigel, came close to saying that in a recent interview on *belief.net*, a Web site that specializes in religious issues.

Mr. Weigel suggested that one of the surest ways out of this crisis would be via "a thorough implementation of the great vision of the Second Vatican Council as interpreted by this pontificate, which is the authoritative interpretation of the Council ..."

Leaving aside the ecclesiological implications, one wonders about the historical basis for this view. After all, the council was presided over for three of its four years by Pope Paul VI. Auxiliary Bishop Karol Wojtyla played, at most, only a minor role in it, even after becoming Archbishop of Krakow before the fourth and



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

final session. Moreover, it was Paul VI who, over the course of his 15-year pontificate (1963-78), promulgated its texts and approved and mandated all of the major reforms which the council had adopted.

Therefore, why would the current pope's interpretation of Vatican II be any more "authoritative" than Paul VI's, or John Paul II's successors, for that matter?

If, on the other hand, one were to hold that Catholic fidelity is determined by our readiness to accept whatever any pope teaches, not just what John Paul II teaches, we would be faced with an enormous task of sorting out papal pronouncements of various kinds, all the way back to the first century. Anyone with even a vague familiarity with church history, and with the history of the papacy in particular, is

aware that there are any number of ecclesiastical skeletons in the closet.

Under pressure from an Arian emperor, Pope Liberius (352-66) approved the excommunication of St. Athanasius, the great defender of Catholic orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea (325).

Pope Honorius I (625-38) was excommunicated, not by a synod but by an ecumenical council — the Third Council of Constantinople (680) — for his unwitting adherence to the heresy of Monothelism, which posited only one (divine) will in Christ.

Pope Stephen VI (896-97) was deposed from office by a Roman synod for having presided over the so-called Cadaver Synod, which had placed the corpse of his predecessor, Pope Formosus (891-96), on trial on trumped-up charges.

Pope Sergius III (904-11) did even worse to his predecessor, Leo V, ordering his murder.

Although the Petrine ministry is an essential component in the life and structure of the church, the church has managed to survive for long periods without even being sure which claimant to the papal office was the rightful successor of Peter.

Of the more than 260 popes, only a handful are regarded today as having

been truly outstanding. Most were ordinary to mediocre, leaving no imprint on the history of the church, and some were scandalously inept.

And now to the second question: Which papal teachings?

Not all papal teachings are of equal authority. We cannot automatically assume that every papal teaching is beyond criticism or even correction. If we did make that assumption, it would mean that every teaching of every pope must be treated as if it were infallible, that is, immune from error.

The Catholic Church makes no such claim. On the contrary, the church's formal teaching on papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869-70) clearly states that papal infallibility is a participation in the infallibility of the whole church and that it can only be exercised within certain limits: (1) the pope must be acting as earthly head of the universal church; (2) he must be teaching about a matter of faith or morals (rooted in Scripture and tradition); and (3) he must explicitly intend to bind the whole church.

Theories are fine so long as they are theologically and historically sound.

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

Embracing God's call brings the joy of salvation

26th Sunday of the Year (September 29); (R3) Matthew 21:28-32; (R1) Ezekiel 18:25-28; (R2) Philippians 2:1-11.

In Sunday's parable of "The Two Sons," Jesus begins by saying, "A man had two sons." Right away we know we are in for drama, for whenever two brothers are mentioned in Scripture, a drama is sure to follow!

Jesus says that the father asked his two sons to work in his vineyard. The first son says he won't, but then changes his mind and does what his father asked. The second son says he'll go, but he doesn't go to work. The point our Lord wanted to make was, what we say isn't as important as what we do.

The parable is about integrity. We should mean what we say. What we do should match what we say.

Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of many of the elders and priests of his day. He told them that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before them.

Jesus was not saying that tax collectors and prostitutes were better than the elders and priests. He was saying that when tax collectors and prostitutes heard his message, they turned from evil and did good. They were better than those who



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

were supposed to be good but did not embrace the good when it was offered them. The prostitutes and tax collectors were the "first son" in Jesus' parable.

When Jesus confronted the elders and priests, they responded by conspiring with the Romans to put him to death.

The story of David and the prophet Nathan is much like our Lord's parable.

David was the "good son." He was a poet who wrote most of the Psalms. He was the boy hero who slew Goliath with nothing but a slingshot. God chose him to be the king of Israel. But David was not perfect.

While his troops were away in battle, David stayed at home. One day while walking on the roof of his palace, he saw a woman bathing. Her name was Bathshe-

ba. David learned that she was the wife of Uriah who was off fighting on behalf of David. In spite of this knowledge, David had Bathsheba come to the palace where he made her pregnant. David then compounded this wrong with another. He ordered his general Joab to put Uriah in a position on the battlefield where he would be slain.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan told him the story of a rich and a poor man. The rich man had many flocks. The poor man had only one lamb. When a visitor came to the house of the rich man, rather than serving a lamb from his great flock, the rich man took the lamb of the poor man and served it to the visitor. David was outraged. He said, "The man who did this deserves to die!" Nathan said, "You are the man!"

David realized he had sinned against the Lord. Then he wrote the beautiful 51st Psalm in which he pleaded for God to give him back salvation. God heard David's plea and forgave him!

We have in these stories two reactions to sin. When Jesus confronts the elders and priests, they harden their hearts and plot his execution. When Nathan confronts David, his heart is touched, he confesses his sins and God gives him back the

joy of salvation.

We must never let ourselves become blind to our sins, like the elders and the priests of our Lord's day. Rather, like David, we ought to always turn to God.

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

Daily Readings

Monday, September 30
Job: 1:6-22; Psalms 17:1-3, 6-7; Luke 9:46-50

Tuesday, October 1
Job 3:1-3, 11-17, 20-23; Psalms 88:2-8; Luke 9:51-56

Wednesday, October 2
Job 9:1-12, 14-16; Psalms 88:10-15; Matthew 18:1-5, 10

Thursday, October 3
Job 19:21-27; Psalms 27:7-9, 13-14; Luke 10:1-12

Friday, October 4
Job 38:1, 12-21, 40:3-5; Psalms 139:1-3, 7-10, 13-14; Luke 10:13-16

Saturday, October 5
Job 42:1-3, 5-6, 12-17; Psalms 119:66, 71, 75, 91, 125, 130; Luke 10:17-24

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