

# Church needs help of qualified laity

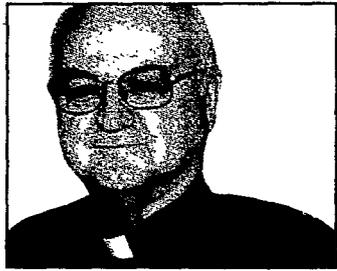
One of the positive effects of the sexual-abuse crisis in the church has been the stirring of a new sense of responsibility on the part of thousands of lay people. Voice of the Faithful, founded by Dr. James Muller, Nobel Prize-winning cardiologist, and currently headed by Boston University professor James Post, continues to grow nationwide.

The organization has a simple agenda: to reach out to the victims and survivors of sexual abuse by priests, to support priests of integrity, and to help shape structural change within the church by offering assistance in matters in which the laity enjoy particular competence.

But not every lay contributor to the discussion about the scandal possesses the theological knowledge and measured judgment of the two lay leaders referred to above.

The Second Vatican Council taught that the church is the whole people of God, laity as well as clergy and religious. The council's expectation was that many lay people would eventually acquire the necessary competence in "the sacred sciences" to approximate, if not fully match, the competence they enjoy in their own secular occupations.

To some limited extent, this has happened. Most doctorates in theology are conferred these days on laymen and laywomen. And since the council, increasing



Father Richard McBrien

## Essays in Theology

numbers of lay people have earned master's degrees in theology and in religious education. Many of them serve as directors of religious education, as directors of liturgy or as religion teachers.

However, the vast majority of Catholic laity still have only limited familiarity with the Catholic tradition. Those who are aware of their limitations hesitate to speak out on religious issues, except in matters of plain, common sense, as is the case with many aspects of the sexual-abuse scandal.

Unfortunately, others are not so inhibited. They assume that the catechism "theology" they learned many years ago is still fully operative and that there have been no significant developments since then. Or they read the Bible and perhaps the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as if their meanings were as "obvious" as the (translated) words on their pages.

The language of the U.S. Constitution seems clear, too, but an intricate judiciary system and a body of

well-trained constitutional lawyers exist to interpret it. The ideologically driven, however, fail to make the connection when it comes to issues of theology and doctrine. It is as if one doesn't require any formal background in biblical studies to interpret the Word of God in more than a pious or superficial way, nor any serious and sustained theological education to adequately understand the nuances and historical contexts of the church's official teachings.

A recent e-mail from a disgruntled reader, disturbed by a reference in a previous column to the pope's moral opposition to the war in Iraq, offered up two major erroneous assumptions in the space of as many lines: (1) Catholics are bound only by "ex cathedra" teachings; and (2) the natural law does not bind non-Catholics (like President Bush).

The writer's central concern, however, was the enforcement of the church's teaching on abortion — a teaching which is technically not "ex cathedra" and which applies to non-Catholics and Catholics alike, derived as it is from the natural law that binds everyone.

When political bias compromises religious judgment, inconsistency almost inevitably follows.

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

## Recipients educate volunteers

### To the editor:

I commend Mike Latona for a fine snapshot of Cornell student volunteer service in Appalachia in the July 24 *Courier* ("Cultural change stirs Cornell group"). In addition, I wish to clarify two points which may leave wrong impressions. While we repair some homes which the government considers substandard, rarely do we encounter "decrepit" homes. More often we work in middle class homes owned by physically isolated widowed seniors, who, because of age, find it difficult to keep up house and yard in the manner they wish.

Also, while it is true that the elderly in Appalachia typically lack much formal schooling — like my own father who only completed fourth grade — this does not mean they are "largely uneducated," for education takes place in many other ways. In fact, the Appalachian people whose lives we have been blessed to share over the last 25 years have taught us many things from their rich cultural storehouse. For example, each year one dear friend in his 70s has taken our group mountain hiking and spelunking. Students listen spellbound as he teaches them from his treasure trove of knowledge of nature and practical wisdom. He speaks often of his childhood when, as a 10 year old on a whim, he and a friend would set out into the virgin forest

for two weeks at a time to have fun, taking only a pocketknife, (no, not even matches!), and relying solely on nature for food and shelter. Our education has certainly not empowered us for anything like that!

All in all, our weeks in Appalachia routinely turn a stereotype on its head. It's not brilliant Cornellians enriching the uneducated. Rather, it is smart, intelligent, and savvy Appalachians opening a whole new world of learning beyond books to us, who know so little of it.

Father Michael J. Mahler  
Pastor, St. Catherine of  
Siena Church, Ithaca

## As Christians we follow a narrow path

### To the editor:

I believe that, with all due respect, Msgr. William Shannon is missing the point — a substantive point at that — when he writes in his letter of July 24 that "homosexual people do not choose their homosexual condition." True as that may be — and we still don't know if that's scientifically proven — neither do we choose our heterosexual condition. In fact, we don't choose our human condition which, as the Church has traditionally taught, is subject to concupiscence. To have natural tendencies is not what the Church condemns, but rather to act upon illicit natural tendencies.

The Church teaches that any sexual act outside of marriage, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is illicit. Of course, since society has normalized extramarital sex between heterosexuals it's only a short step to normalize extramarital sex between homosexuals, and then an even shorter step to accept marriage between homosexuals.

Christians are not expected to have it easy, nor to follow whatever nature seems to dictate to them. Theirs is a narrow path, a difficult path, and if we're not ready to accept it then we're not

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This quilt hangs in the first communion room at St. Catherine of Siena Church, Ithaca.

Christians. They need to get re-

Ro:

## Criticism can be charitable

### To the editor:

To echo Msgr. Shannon's letter to you must raise my question of letters to the editor and published week in your Msgr. Shannon's question, "why reaction?" to written by Sis Schoelles. Wh just reaction to Whenever Father Bishop Clark author writes about any church issue — the attack course, the light suits tend to be liberty, moving tabe abortion. And al sponse is the sa that raise these do not absolute them have no fa wish I could be s my own faith as solid ground c another's! Altho us whose faith questioned — I g in good compa member reading again how the 1