

"The Church as Mystery, or Sacrament"

Week of July 18, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

"The best preparation for the new millennium," the late Pope John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter of 1994, *Tertio millennio adveniente* ("On the approaching third millennium"), "can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church."

The problem is that many Catholics believe, not without reason, that the leadership of the Church has been in the process these past few decades of ignoring or even dismantling the reforms achieved at the Second Vatican Council.

This dismantling effort is revealed in the changing of the texts of the Mass and the other sacraments (often referred to as the "reform of the reform") beginning on the First Sunday of Advent, and in the appointment of bishops deemed unquestionably loyal to the Holy See, especially on issues such as contraception, the ordination of women, and obligatory clerical celibacy.

The changed complexion of the U.S. hierarchy, to take but one example, was dramatically disclosed in the insistence of some leading American bishops (one of whom was subsequently called to Rome and made a cardinal) that it would be a grave sin for Catholics to vote for Senator John Kerry, a Catholic, for President in 2004 or for Senator Barack Obama in 2008; the widespread opposition of many more bishops to the University of Notre Dame's invitation to now-President Obama to be its Commencement speaker and honorary degree recipient in 2009; and the virtual silence of the bishops in key states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida regarding the attack on workers' bargaining rights, long a linchpin of Catholic social teaching.

Such bishops, in turn, attract (or discourage) a certain type of candidate for the priesthood. So the problem comes closer and closer to home for the majority of Catholics, one in ten of whom have already drifted away from the Church. According to the recent Pew Study, ex-Catholics would constitute the second largest Christian denomination if they were considered a church unto themselves.

It is more than appropriate during a time such as this to be sure that we embrace anew each of the ecclesiological contours of Vatican II's teachings. That is why I am devoting several columns over the next few weeks to the major ecclesiological themes or principles proclaimed at the council.

The first and most basic ecclesiological principle at Vatican II is that the Church is a *mystery*, or *sacrament*, and not only or even primarily an institution or organization.

To say that the Church is a mystery, or sacrament, means, in the words of the late Pope Paul VI, that it is "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God."

In other words, the Church is not just a religious organization to which we belong or which we serve, as good churchmen or churchwomen. Rather, the Church is the corporate presence of God in Christ, with a unity created and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

"I believe in the Church" does not mean "I believe in, am loyal to, the leadership or the rules of the Church." Only God is the proper object of faith—but in this case, God as present and active in the Church.

The council's sacramental understanding of the Church helped us to see how essential renewal and reform are to the Church's mission and ministries.

More and more since Vatican II, the Church has been challenged to practice what it preaches because we recognize more clearly than ever before that the Church has a missionary obligation to manifest visibly what it embodies invisibly.

The Church is called to be a visible, communal sign of the invisible, renewing presence of God in the world and in human history.

"The first means of evangelization," Pope Paul VI declared in his 1975 apostolic exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, "is the witness of an authentically Christian life."

He continued: "Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses...."

"It is therefore by its conduct and by its life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by its living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus—the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity" (n. 41).

Those who insist on their role as teachers of the Church must take to heart those words of Paul VI. Their teaching is empty if it is not accompanied by a clear and compelling witness to the Gospel itself.

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"The People of God"
 Week of July 25, 2011
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Who or what is the Church? It is first and foremost people. It is also an institution. But it is primarily a community. The Church is us.

A second major ecclesiological principle adopted by the Second Vatican Council is embodied in its teaching that the Church is the whole *People of God*.

In other words, the Church is not only the hierarchy, the clergy, and/or members of religious communities. It is the whole community of the baptized.

And that community is marked by a rich diversity of gender, class, education, social status, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and culture. It includes saints and sinners alike.

One of the council's most important affirmations, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, known by its Latin title as *Lumen gentium*, declared that charisms, or gifts of the Holy Spirit, are available to all the faithful, "of every rank" (n. 12).

We find the People-of-God principle realized, although with varying degrees of success, in parish councils, in base communities, in the multiplication of ministries, and particularly in ministries associated with the liturgy, education, and social justice.

The Church that has entered the 21st century and the Third Christian Millennium is a Church in which an increasing number of its members, laywomen and laymen alike, are ministerially involved.

One does not need any scientific surveys to verify what is obvious to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, namely, that the great majority of parish ministers today are women, and this is likely to remain so into the indefinite future.

At the same time, the alienation of many Catholic women from the official Church remains one of its most serious pastoral challenges. The highly publicized failure of the U.S. Catholic bishops more than a decade ago to produce an acceptable pastoral letter on women, after nine years of effort, only underscored the problem.

More recently, Bishop William Morris of the Australian diocese of Toowoomba was removed from the leadership of his diocese because he had suggested in an earlier pastoral letter that, in light of the severity of the vocations crisis, the Church would have to be "much more open towards other options for ensuring that Eucharist may be celebrated." These options included the ordination of women to the priesthood.

According to Bishop Morris, the letter from Pope Benedict XVI cited this very point as the principal grounds for his removal. The pope declared that women's ordination was now a closed issue because Pope John Paul II had definitively, that is, infallibly, pronounced on the subject in his 1994 statement *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* ("Priestly ordination"). Therein, John Paul II insisted that the Church was not authorized to ordain women as priests.

We are now in a kind of patchwork stage, having changed Mass schedules to permit fewer priests to celebrate more Masses on a given weekend, while closing or merging parishes.

Many Catholics worry about the lowering of standards in seminaries, the ignoring of the results of psychological testing (if there is any) or the reports of pastoral supervisors, many of whom are women. These reports concern the pastoral performance and personal qualities of candidates for the priesthood.

Importing priests from Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe is not the answer. On the contrary, it sometimes generates new problems to be added to the old.

If the People of God are to be effectively served in the coming decades, the Church will have to be "much more open," as Bishop Morris suggested, to ordaining married men to the priesthood, welcoming back resigned priests to active ministry, and ordaining women, married or single.

Social scientists like the late Dean Hoge of The Catholic University of America and the late Richard Schoenherr of the University of Wisconsin have in the past strongly recommended such changes, insisting that they would end the current vocations shortage in the Catholic Church.

Others, however, seem convinced that the problem will somehow go away through prayer and fasting, or by purging seminaries of dissident theologians and homosexuals, or by more inventive techniques of making personal contact with prospective candidates for the priesthood.

More than twenty years ago, Eugene Kennedy, the psychologist and prolific writer, addressed this topic in a memorable article in *America* magazine entitled, "The Problem with No Name." He wrote: "...the male-bonded culture of clerical life is in ruins because it is a vestige of the great days of privilege, not because people lack interest in ministry" (4/23/88).

Calling the Church the People of God, as the council did, means that we all have responsibility for its life and mission, especially at a time when its leadership sometimes functions as an obstacle rather than a facilitator.

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