"The Church as Servant"

Week of August 1, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

A third major ecclesiological principle in the Second Vatican Council's teaching is that the mission of the Church includes service to human needs in the social, economic, and political orders, as well as the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

Evangelization, or the preaching of the Gospel, essentially includes the pursuit of justice and the transformation of the world. As Pope Paul VI wrote in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, Evangelii nuntiandi ("On Evangelization in the Modern World"), evangelization involves "a message especially energetic today about liberation" (n. 29).

It is highly instructive that even so conservative a pope as John Paul II should have been so forthright about the Church's social teachings.

This was evident not only in his three major social encyclicals–in 1981 Laborem exercens ("On Human Work"), in 1988 Sollicitudo rei socialis ("On the Social Concern of the Church"), and in 1991 Centesimus annus ("The Hundredth Year" after Leo XIII's Rerum novarum)–but also in the homilies and public addresses he delivered in the United States and Canada, Central and South America, Poland, the Philippines, Africa, at the United Nations, and elsewhere around the world.

In his fourth pastoral visit to the United States in 1995, he called upon America not to close its arms to immigrants nor its heart to the poor and the powerless.

It would do well for us to listen again to John Paul II's prophetic words at Yankee Stadium in October, 1979: "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

He made the same point again at Xavier University in New Orleans in September, 1987: "It is not enough to offer to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth, and crumbs of bread. The Gospels call for much more. The parable of the rich man and the poor man is directed to the conscience of humanity and, today in particular, to the conscience of America."

And preaching earlier in Edmonton, Alberta, in September, 1984, the pope used strong words that still ring with power: "In the light of Christ's words, this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations–poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights–will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expenses of others."

Finally, speaking at Giants Stadium in New Jersey in October, 1995, Pope John Paul II shaped his words specifically for an American audience: "Compared to many other parts of the world, the United States is a privileged, privileged land. Yet even here there is much poverty and human suffering. There is much need for love and the works of love; there is need for social solidarity" marked by "a great openness and sensitivity to the needs of [one's] neighbors."

But one paragraph in his speech stood out above all the rest. The pope introduced it with a pointed reference to the Statue of Liberty and its world-famous invitation: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...."

"Is present-day America," he asked, "becoming less sensitive, less caring toward the poor, the weak, the stranger, the needy? It must not! Today as before, the United States is called to be a hospitable, hospitable society, a welcoming culture. If America were to turn in on itself, would this not be the beginning of the end of what constitutes the very essence of the 'American experience'?"

The Church, the council reminded us in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (n. 3), is a servant Church, like Jesus himself who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The world and the Church of this new century and new millennium are looking for people who are prepared to lay down their lives, figuratively and sometimes literally, in the service of others, like Archbishop Oscar Romero and the six Jesuits and the four churchwomen of El Salvador, more than 30 years ago.

The Church and the world at large will turn away from those who seek only to lord it over others, and even to prevent them from reading and hearing theological and pastoral points of view different from their own.

Like Jesus himself, the Church is a servant.

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08/08/11

"The Church as Communion"

Week of August 8, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The late Cardinal John Dearden, archbishop of Detroit, noted at the University of Notre Dame some years ago that many of the bishops appointed after the Second Vatican Council never had the opportunity of experiencing the transforming effect of Vatican II.

For those bishops, like himself, who directly participated in the council, it was as if they had gone on a four-year retreat, a retreat that changed and enriched their understanding of the Church.

Most of these bishops emerged from the council as new men, ready to serve their dioceses with deeper dedication than before.

What was true of the pre-Vatican II bishops was also true of the pre-Vatican II laity. A layperson today would have to be over 60 years old to have any meaningful memory of the pre-Vatican II Church. Without that memory, one would find it very difficult–not impossible, to be sure–to appreciate what the council did for the Church.

That is why mainly older Catholics are drawn to lay organizations such as Call to Action and Voice of the Faithful. It is not that younger Catholics have no interest in church renewal and reform, but they have never personally experienced the pre-Vatican II Church nor the achievements wrought by the council itself.

Older Catholics–in their 60s, 70s, 80s, and some few in their 90s–know what the pre-Vatican II Church was like and how much better it became because of Pope John XXIII and the council he convened. That is why many of them have been disheartened by what they regard as a kind of retrenchment under Pope John Paul II and now Benedict XVI, and many of the bishops they appointed.

Many younger Catholics–at least those who care enough to remain more or less active in the Church–do not appreciate why many older Catholics are so unhappy with the state of the Church today.

For the past several weeks this column has been underscoring some of the most important ecclesiological principles espoused by the council. This week the emphasis is on the council's teaching that the Church is a communion–a communion between God and ourselves (the vertical dimension) and a communion of ourselves with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (the horizontal dimension).

Because the Church is a communion, its institutional structure is collegial rather than monarchical.

Understanding the Church as a communion also means that the Church is not a single international parish under the pastoral leadership of the pope, subdivided into dioceses and parishes for administrative efficiency only.

The Church is a communion of local churches, or dioceses, each of which is the Body of Christ in its own particular place (Lumen gentium, n. 26).

Together these local churches constitute the universal Church. Their unity one with another is rooted in the presence and sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit, manifested especially in the celebration of the Eucharist.

This communal notion of the Church underscores the traditional importance of councils, synods, and conferences of bishops in the life and structure of the Church, operative especially during the First Christian Millennium and in the East generally throughout both millennia.

Especially in those areas of the world like our own, in the United States and Canada, where democratic, collaborative, and participatory forms of governance are taken for granted, the Church, too, needs to act in an increasingly collegial and collaborative manner.

Presbyteral councils, in union with the bishops, must exercise deliberative as well as consultative authority, but always in collaboration with other conciliar or synodal expressions of the local church, including in particular the diocesan pastoral council.

The Church's mode of activity will necessarily differ from region to region. It will take longer, for example, in some regions of the world to accept a married clergy or the presence of women in positions of real pastoral authority than in other regions, like our own.

But such developments as these are inevitable, even though some bishops, such as William Morris of Australia, have been sacked for even raising the possibility.

No one can hold back the future–or the irrepressible work of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Holy Spirit, not the hierarchy, not even the pope, who governs the Church and leads it through all of human history to its final destiny in the Kingdom of God.

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