

March 2007

Job spoke to his companions and said:

“Would that my words were written down. Would that they were inscribed in a record. That with an iron chisel and with lead they were cut in the rock forever. But, as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust; Whom I myself shall see; my own eyes, not another’s shall behold him. And from my flesh I shall see God; my inmost being is consumed with longing.”

I knew Joan Sokoll for more than thirty years. I met her when I was still a seminarian.

Joan was a religion teacher, then Religious Education Director in a parish in the Diocese of Brooklyn. Her skills were widely recognized and resulted in her being employed by the Diocese in the Office of Religious Education.

More recently, Joan offered to help me create this Web Page.

In September, Joan was called home to her God, whom she loved.

I had suspected that I would have years to learn how to take care of my own Web site. I thought that Joan would teach me how to upload my seasonal contributions to this page. I was wrong.

The reason it took me so long to get back to all of you was that I had to wait until I was able to transfer ownership of the site from Joan’s family, learn the intricacies of Web design, and begin to post your contributions and mine once again. I am grateful for your patience, my brother’s mentoring, and the assistance of Joan’s family with this project.

Joan’s words continue to be written, not on stone, but throughout cyberspace. Her words appear on her own pages, on the pages she created for others, and in the hearts of those she touched. Her message continues to live in her children and her students.

Joan was a religious educator, a mother, and a faithful disciple. Her life centered on the Church she loved. She saw its faults. She was aware of its shortcomings. Nevertheless she dedicated her entire life to the People of God.

I pray that Joan enjoys being a part of the Victorious Church as much as she enjoyed being part of the Pilgrim Church.

Her soul is now in the hand of God.

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the *Shema* was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up. The rabbi, learned as he was in the Law and commentaries, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested that he consult a housebound 98-year-old man who was one of the original founders of their temple. The rabbi hoped the elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was, so he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation. The one whose followers stood during *Shema* said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?" The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition." The one whose followers sat said, "Then the tradition is to sit during *Shema*!" The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition." Then the rabbi said to the old man, "But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand." The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is the tradition!"

“Let those who have ears listen!”

November 17, 2006

Vatican Reaffirms Support of Celibacy for Clergy

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO for the New York Times

ROME, Nov. 16 — The [Vatican](#) reiterated its position on Thursday on celibacy for the clergy, addressing the challenge from a renegade archbishop who has been lobbying to persuade the church to accept marriage for Roman Catholic priests.

"The value of the choice of priestly celibacy, according to the Catholic tradition, has been reaffirmed," the Vatican said in a brief statement released after a three-hour meeting among [Pope Benedict XVI](#) and top-ranking cardinals and prelates.

The statement said that the Vatican had also reiterated "the need for solid human and Christian training for seminarians as well as already ordained priests."

The interesting thing today is not that the Vatican reaffirmed celibacy for priests. That was the expected reaction to Archbishop Milingo. The truly interesting thing is that it "reiterated 'the need for solid human and Christian training for seminarians as well as already ordained priests.'" Can solid human training for priests and seminarians really occur in seminaries and rectories that isolate priests from the human concerns of the people to whom they presently minister or will minister some day?

November 13th, 2006

Are Bible Stories "Myths"?

Found on [catholicsensibility](#)

Fr Breck suggests that the Bible does reflect "certain universal mythical themes," but claims that these themes have been "transformed by the essentially historical interest of its various authors." While Bible stories must reflect some "kernel" of historical reality in contrast to other "myths," the use of mythical themes shows that the biblical writers' concern was not merely to tell us "what really happened." The writers, inspired by God, do not mean to communicate what is definitively past and gone, but rather what must be reactualized to be spiritually experienced once more in the immediate present. ...

We take it for granted that historiography will record for us an accurate picture of "what really happened," events that are demonstrably factual. To the Israelites, however, the aim of written "history" is not primarily to record facts or provide a record of actual past events. Their sagas, for example, convey above all theological and spiritual meaning for the present. Those epic stories (e.g., of Noah or the Patriarchs) are built on an indispensable, if irrecoverable, kernel of historical reality. Their true significance, however, lies in their ability to relate that past event to the present life of the people. History for the ancient Israelites is meaningful only to the extent that it is living history, extending, as it were, from the past into the present life of the people. Accordingly, the Hebrew concept of "remembrance" signifies reactualization: to remember the past is to experience its conditions and challenges in the immediate present.

This perspective is troubling to many people because it seems to throw into question the "historicity," the historical reality, of much of the biblical tradition. Yet the reason it does so is because we misunderstand the true meaning and function of myth. In today's parlance, the term myth implies "fable," "folklore" or "legend": a story with no historical underpinnings that serves to convey a moral lesson or simply to amuse. Applied to Scripture, however, the term myth properly describes a tradition that uses human language and images to express the ineffable interaction between the immanent and the transcendent, between God and His human creatures. The myth, rooted in actual historical occurrence, interprets that occurrence (an element of salvation history) so as to convey its meaning for us in our own life and experience. This does not mean that we have to call into question the historical grounding of that event. It means, rather, that the ultimate significance of an event lies less in its being a fact of the past than in its continuing influence in our life and faith today.

Some readers have questioned my use of the term “myth’ to describe elements central to Christian faith. It is in the context of the above excerpt from Christiansensibility.com that I use the term. A myth is not something that is untrue. It is often something that is so true that prose can not adequately convey the truth. In such cases, the truth must be expressed in a story or in poetry.

Press Release
by the Undersigned Members of
Catholic Organizations for Renewal
November 12, 2006

An expected set of "pastoral guidelines" scheduled for review by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) at its annual Fall meeting in Baltimore begins with an erroneous understanding of what it means to be homosexual, Catholic reform leaders say in a letter to U.S. Catholic bishops.

The bishops’ premise that homosexuality is a choice rather than a deeply ingrained emotional and psychological attraction for members of the same sex that is a part of one’s basic humanity has caused much harm, Catholic church reform leaders agree.

The bishops latest guidelines, entitled "Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care" begins with the premise that homosexuality is an inclination towards same-gender, genital activity and it denies the well-known existence of homosexual orientation as a normal variation of human sexuality, members of Catholic Organizations for Renewal, a forum of 23 North American church reform groups said in a letter to the USCCB committees that drafted the proposed pastoral guidelines.

Because of the committee’s mistaken premise and their failure to consult widely with affected and knowledgeable lay members of the church, the group says the guidelines are "deeply flawed." Further the proposed guidelines are not at all pastoral but rather harmful because they repeat the same "spiritually violent language" used over the past 20 years, describing homosexuality as "objectively disordered" and labeling same-gender relationships "inherently evil." We bear witness to the physical and spiritual harm done to the Catholic community, ourselves, our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters, specifically because of this language.

Noting that under church law (Canon Law 212, 3), Catholics are encouraged to make their concerns known to the bishops, especially in areas where they have special expertise, the groups urge the bishops to withdraw the proposed guidelines and begin anew with consultations with members of the church at large, including those most affected by the document, homosexual Catholics.

Catholic Organizations for Renewal is a forum of 23 church reform and renewal organizations in the United States and Canada, which meets twice annually. The letter to the bishops was drafted and approved by the following signatories at the group’s Nov. 1 -2, 2006 meeting in Milwaukee prior to Call to Action USA’s annual meeting, which drew more than 3,200 participants.

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Inclusive Priesthood: Tomorrow's Priests
COMMONWEAL
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Tomorrow's Priests

The Editors

The Catholic priesthood in the United States stands at a crossroads. An increasingly sophisticated Catholic laity fills the church's pews and staffs its ever-growing parishes, and yet the church has failed to produce a corps of new priests to match it in either quantity or quality. True, some data suggest that today's recently ordained clergy are happier than their predecessors, and this is good news for stemming attrition in the short term. But over the long haul, happiness won't be enough. Dean R. Hoge's new study, *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years* (National Catholic Educational Association), paints a worrying portrait of the priests who will serve U.S. Catholics in the decades to come. Compared with the priests in Hoge's previous 1990 study, today's new clergy are not only fewer in number but also older, less educated, less thoroughly schooled in theology, and less likely to see its relevance to ministry. And they are more heavily burdened with responsibilities, especially early in their careers.

Problems in seminary training have been brewing for some time. By the late 1990s, as the work of sociologist Katarina Schuth, OSF, shows, candidates for the priesthood had become increasingly divided between two groups: one focused on orthodoxy and Roman control, and less inclined to collaboration with the laity; and another, greater in number, but quieter about it, less interested in orders from Rome and more committed to collaborative governance. As for the quality of individual candidates, the Keystone Conferences, which convened Catholic seminary faculties annually from 1995 to 2001, assessed merely 10 percent of their priesthood candidates as highly qualified, and estimated that roughly 40 percent exhibited educational shortcomings ranging from insufficient preparation to learning disabilities.

Now we have Hoge's study to bring us up-to-date, and the results are not encouraging. Neither the polarization problem Schuth described nor the seminarians' educational disadvantages identified in the 90s has abated. Hoge's new study shows a striking drop in theological preparedness among seminarians. In 1990, only 17 percent of diocesan priests in his sample required remedial pre-theology courses after entering the seminary. Today, that figure has leapt to 47 percent. In focus groups, some priests even voiced serious doubts about the relevance of their theology courses to their ministry. How then can they hope to relate doctrine to experience when parishioners come knocking for counsel?

Relating to lay people's experience may prove increasingly difficult for other reasons as well. Recently ordained priests adhere to a cultic model of the priesthood that stresses the essential difference between clergy and laity; the priest, Hoge explains, is seen as a man set apart whose job is providing the sacraments, teaching the Catholic Church's doctrine, and being a model of faith and devotion. A servant-leader model, on the other hand, emphasizes the collaborative elements of clerical leadership within the community. But the popularity of that model, ascendant in the 1960s, has waned.

In any case, as seminaries continue to graduate fewer and fewer priests, the clergy will become literally more set apart and not just from the laity, but also from one another. In 2005, 54 percent of diocesan priests were serving as pastors after an average of seven years in the priesthood—more than double the rate for recently ordained priests in 1990. And of those working as pastors in 2005, 36 percent of diocesan clergy were overseeing more than one parish. Added to the stress of new responsibilities is the challenge of being placed in increasingly solitary living situations. Nearly half of those in the 2005 diocesan sample live alone, up from 29 percent in 1990. Is it any wonder that loneliness is often cited by the recently ordained as one of the major difficulties of adjusting to parish life?

Of course, seminaries can't do everything. Yet some of the issues plaguing recently ordained priests can be addressed. Too few of these men have the training required to do the job adequately—and they know it. Indeed, increased attention to administrative and leadership skills is the number-one suggestion offered by the recently ordained when they make recommendations on how to improve seminary training. Chanceries should take up the task of training priests in the practicalities of running a parish, and work harder to foster a spirit of community among diocesan clergy. However these challenges are addressed, it is clear that more must be done to ensure the health and competence of the recently ordained. At stake is nothing less than the future of the church's sacramental life. The continuation of current trends could spell calamity.

Plenary in Lourdes

At their plenary in Lourdes, the French episcopal conference draws the line:

France's Catholic bishops called on rebel traditionalists on Thursday to show full loyalty to 1960s Vatican reforms if they want to return to the Roman fold and celebrate the old Latin mass with papal approval.

Their message gave official support to a rare clerical protest spreading across France against the Pope's reported plan to readmit the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) to the Church without requiring their support for the reforms.

In a carefully worded statement the bishops, meeting in the pilgrimage town of Lourdes in southwestern France, said they shared with Pope Benedict an attachment to "the riches of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council"....

"The liturgical question is not the only source of difficulties," the bishops said in a message expressing support for their leader, Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, in negotiations with the Vatican on readmitting the SSPX.

"The bishops expect from these faithful a gesture of unequivocal assent to the teaching of the authentic magisterium of the Church," they said, referring to the Catholic dogmas updated by the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

Ricard, who rushed to Rome to meet Benedict when reports of an imminent compromise with the SSPX emerged in October, told the bishops last weekend that the Vatican had not yet made any decision and was open to hearing the French church's views.

N.B. At Benedict's appointment, Ricard is a member of the Pontifical Commission Ecclesia Dei, which handles issues of the indult and ecumenical dialogue with traditionalists.

The Swiss-based SSPX was expelled from the Church in 1988 when its founder, French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, consecrated four bishops without Vatican approval. It rejects Vatican II and wants the Holy See to return to its pre-Council traditions.

Its current head, Bishop Bernard Fellay, has said he wants the SSPX to be readmitted without making any doctrinal deals, an approach the French bishops see as bringing a hard-line opposition inside their post-Council church.

The reported reconciliation has met some criticism from bishops in Belgium, Germany and the United States but open opposition in France, where the SSPX has a small but dedicated following and some links to monarchist and far-right movements.

Stratfor: Public Policy Intelligence Report - November 10, 2006 Executive Compensation: A Bridge Over the Wealth Gap? By Dan Kornfield

The political shift in Washington that has given Democrats a majority in both houses of Congress inevitably will be felt in dozens of policy areas -- including business regulations. The Sarbanes-Oxley law, the corrective action Congress passed in the wake of the Enron Corp. debacle, most certainly will come under scrutiny. Given widespread sentiment that the law, in its original form, is too stringent and needs to be eased in some respects, this would have been the case even if the Republicans had retained congressional power. However, now that Rep. Michael Oxley, R-Ohio, will be forced to give up his chairmanship of the House Committee on Financial Services, the changes are likely to be more sweeping. The lawmaker most likely to replace Oxley at the committee's helm is Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass. Frank has pledged to re-energize legislation that would give shareholders more control over executive compensation -- an issue that currently is receiving a fair amount of attention from survey groups, the press and policy activists. Arguments by social justice, labor and other activist groups, which say executive pay is excessive in comparison to the average worker's wages, have gained some public credence. In response, there likely will be a number of shareholder proposals next spring that seek to tie executive compensation more closely to performance. The most interesting aspect of the executive compensation issue, however, is not which high-flying CEOs are destined to have their wings clipped -- or by how much -- but rather, what might be done with the profits that will not be going into their pockets. A movement is emerging that views corporate profit-sharing as a way to address income gaps and poverty issues around the world, and seeks to buttress the allegedly stagnating American middle class. There will be significant movement by corporate boards, and perhaps some corresponding legislation, to amend executive pay structures during the next two years, but once that debate has run its course, the social justice question in the background likely will surge to the forefront -- with far-reaching implications. Executive Pay: The Current Debate With more than 140 companies conducting internal reviews -- or being subjected to government investigations -- for backdating stock options, executive compensation is frequently mentioned in business news coverage. Last week, the Financial Times released a study showing that the median pay package (including salary, bonuses and exercised options) of Standard & Poor's 500 CEOs rose 20 percent during the past fiscal year, to about \$5 million, but net profits increased by an average of only 15 percent and shareholder returns by a mere 9 percent. Investors and activists

have voiced concern that executive compensation is excessive, and that it is detached from the actual performance of the company an executive leads. These concerns are not merely theoretical debates. According to Institutional Shareholder Services, there were votes on 103 (nonbinding) resolutions -- filed by shareholders who demanded action on executive compensation issues -- at the annual meetings of corporate boards during the past two years. To put that into some context, the most frequently balloted governance issue, takeover bids, garnered 190 resolutions during that period. Some companies are now beginning to incorporate their executive pay policies into their overall brand image. For example, some have capped executive salaries at a specific ratio, pegged to the average or lowest salary of their employees. Ben & Jerry's pioneered this concept by maintaining a 7:1 ratio between the highest and lowest salaries at the company for 10 years, beginning in the mid-1980s. Whole Foods currently caps its salaries using a ratio (which the company's board recently voted to increase to 19:1 from 14:1). It is not yet clear whether the choice of ratio caps will go mainstream, but several of the shareholder resolutions filed this year demanded that companies report on or set targets for executive pay in relation to other workers' wages. Addressing the Income Gap Though activist campaigns likely will continue for some time, public interest in the executive compensation issue probably has already peaked. If it had not, there would have been a serious outcry during the spring, when environmental groups were trying to drum up outrage over ExxonMobil CEO Lee Raymond's retirement package of almost \$400 million -- which was hitting the news at a time when oil prices were soaring. The public outrage never really broke out, though, and it is difficult to imagine a case with more populist appeal. That is an indication that, at the end of the day, Americans believe success should be rewarded, and that extraordinary success should be rewarded extraordinarily. Nonetheless, away from the public eye, activity is brewing. Over the next two years, we expect corporate governance experts to be hammering out new best practices related to executive compensation. But as that issue dies down, another will emerge -- probably around the time of the 2008 election. Flipping the issue around somewhat, the next argument likely will not be that corporate executives are earning too much, but that the average Joe is earning too little. According to the most recent survey by United for a Fair Economy (UFE) and Institute for Policy Studies -- longtime critics of corporations in general and corporate managers in particular -- the ratio of CEO pay to average worker pay in the United States went from 42:1 in 1980 to 107:1 in 1991 and 411:1 in 2005. Groups concerned that there is a growing gap between the very wealthy and the poor in the United States frequently cite reports such as the Economic Policy Institute's analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, which concludes that family income rose by 3 percent from 1979 to 2001 for the lowest-paid 20 percent of Americans, while it rose by 53 percent for the top 20 percent. Other statistics are cited to indicate that not only are the rich getting richer and the poor getting (only relatively) poorer, but that there is a gradual hollowing-out of the center of the middle class. Statistics always can be manipulated, of course, to serve a particular end, but for the purposes of policy movement, it is the public perception rather than the reality that counts. In the United States, the concern is not so much over people's absolute standard of living -- although that is a related issue -- so much as the degree to which society cleaves into very distinct and increasingly polarized classes, and that social mobility is significantly hampered by the entrenched advantages of the upper class. For some, this is a violation of a moral egalitarian ideal; for others, it represents a risk to social harmony. So far, these arguments have not gained much political traction among Americans, but this could change now that Democratic Party is in power -- and in the midst of its own attempt to define the party's core values. A mild downturn in the U.S. economy during the first half of 2007, which we anticipate, could make that shift more pronounced as well. Increasingly, Democratic campaign rhetoric pits the "interests of the middle class" against the Republicans' alleged devotion to the "interests of the wealthy." This line of argument helped John Edwards put forth a good showing as a young candidate in 2004, and it might have helped the Democrats take back the House (although this argument certainly was not the key issue in the Nov. 7 election). Moreover, this is a line that Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y.,

increasingly has been using, and it likely will be a rhetorical foundation for the Democrats as they seek to reorient the party before 2008. Other groups that could make wage structure and profit-sharing arguments in the United States over the next couple of years include labor unions, wealthy philanthropists and those concerned with income disparities between racial groups. Service Employees International Union and its new Change to Win Coalition are looking for ways to lock their service professionals into a system that maintains competitive wages for medium-skilled employees. On the other side of the socioeconomic spectrum, Responsible Wealth -- a project of UFE that is currently focused on tax policy advocacy -- might begin to pitch profit-sharing reforms as the logical next step in the responsible allocation of society's resources. The income gap presents more immediate problems outside the United States. In developing nations such as China, India and Brazil -- which many multinational corporations already view as important bases of production and hope eventually to count as significant markets for their products or services -- the income gap is not an abstract future problem but a gritty, stark reality. The extent of the income gap in these countries creates a problem that is even more serious than the lack of middle-class market demand. That problem is the skepticism of the economically disenfranchised toward the premise that liberal democracies and market economies are really the best political and economic system. In Latin America, for example, it could be argued that the region took a turn to the left -- even though socialism had seemed dead in the 1990s -- because entrenched poverty remained even after the painful birthing of democratic systems, capitalism and structural adjustments imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Similarly, China is currently trying to avert serious civil strife stemming from dissatisfaction with the unequal distribution of wealth and power following the economic growth of recent years. The Private Sector and Social Problems Among Americans, any suggestions that corporations ought to adjust wage structures in efforts to address a macro-level income gap typically produce one of three reactions: 1. Addressing poverty is the responsibility of government, not the private sector. 2. Addressing poverty is no one's responsibility: Market forces should be allowed to work without interference in determining the allocation of wealth. 3. It is a good idea for companies to re-examine the ways profits are distributed throughout their labor force, since more equal sharing is a way of motivating employees and ensuring corporate success in the market. These are all valid reactions, but corporate culture is not as wedded to the first objection -- and American culture is not as wedded to the second objection -- as one might think. Let's consider these in turn. The idea that addressing serious social problems is the responsibility of the public rather than private sector has come under significant stress. Currently, the mantra used by both activists and industry groups on issues such as human rights is that governments bear the primary responsibility for upholding rights. This choice of words implies that corporations can bear a secondary responsibility -- the parameters of which are still being defined. This is a notion that corporations themselves have begun to adopt as well, through voluntary action on issues -- such as poverty, AIDS and climate change -- that governments cannot handle on their own. In February, the World Business Council on Sustainable Development's "Tomorrow's Leaders" group, which includes executives from major corporations such as BP, Swiss Re and Adidas-Salomon, issued a report titled "The Role of Business in Tomorrow's Society." The report focuses on developing private-sector strategies to tackle "the big issues: poverty, environment, population, globalization." Similarly, some companies are starting to assess their contributions to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals -- eight humanitarian goals, such as measurably reducing child mortality rates, to be achieved by 2015. In short, whether as a result of the normative culture created by notions of corporate social responsibility or because of the complex challenges of operating globally, often in weakly governed areas, corporations are admitting they have a role to play. As to the second reaction -- the assumption that capitalism and market forces should not be meddled with -- there are two points worth bearing in mind. The first is that many governments, including that in Washington, already "tamper" with market forces through the use of minimum wage laws. Moreover, there is growing public support for raising the minimum wage in the United States and

indexing it with inflation in many countries abroad. Also, Howard Dean has made the more radical concept of a "living wage" part of the Democratic Party's platform. Between de jure or de facto limits on minimum wage and executive compensation lies the open playing field of wage structure generally. The second point is that the free market actually might encourage some form of wage restructuring -- particularly in the highly skilled segment of the labor force. As corporations compete for top talent, they already find themselves increasingly offering an explicit share in the company's success. These alternative compensation strategies, challenged by concerns about equal treatment, could eventually be expanded to all employees in some companies -- albeit likely offering much smaller shares in profits for less-skilled workers. None of this is meant to argue that wage structure policies designed to address larger social issues are either a good or bad idea. However, the logic outlined here is why we believe there will be further movement on these issues in the public policy arena. Each of these arguments will find its adherents. The real question, however, will not be whether the general public, as a majority, will reach one of these conclusions and enact it as public policy. Rather, the question is how companies are likely to respond when their peers begin to tout a new approach to profit-sharing programs -- advertising them as ways to both attract and motivate top-notch employees and to address social concerns about poverty and income gaps. At that point, wage policies very well might become a new arena of public competition between corporations. Shareholder resolutions for the large number of companies that will have annual meetings in April are due now, in November. We expect a large number of resolutions on executive compensation, attaining votes in the 30 percent to 40 percent range. But it will come as no surprise if, two years from now, shareholders begin to file resolutions demanding that corporate boards justify wage structures applying to all employees -- not just executives.

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October 30, 2006

What if the Amish Were in Charge on 9/11?: Fantasies of a Christian Nation

I officiated at a baptism for a 6-month old named Kathleen a week or so ago. The family wanted to emphasize the community aspect of the sacrament, so that guided my reflections as I prepared. I realized that although infant baptism doesn't mean much to the infant at the time, it makes a profound difference in her whole life. If, for example, I had been welcomed into a Protestant or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu community, I wouldn't have been there with Kathleen and her family. My life path, my beliefs and even a number of my values would have been dramatically different from who I am today. The fact that we don't know how her future will unfold does not in any way change the impact her baptism into that community will have on her.

Then it struck me: what if our political leaders on 9/11 had been baptized into the Amish community? Would they have responded in the same way the Amish did to the tragic shooting of their daughters in rural Pennsylvania a few months ago? Where would we be today if they had? Would they have let the police authorities handle the investigation, pursuit and punishment of the people who committed the crime? Would international crime fighting networks have been developed and strengthened for combating the organized crime of terrorism?

- Would they have shown the same ability to forgive and heal? Would we be at war today in Iraq and Afghanistan? Would the thousands of U.S. soldiers be dead and the tens of thousands wounded -- and the tens or hundreds of thousands of Iraqis be dead, maimed, terrorized daily by war? Would so many families across the Middle East and here at home be so torn apart? Would so many people face disoriented and disturbed psychological futures?

- Would we have so damaged our moral authority as a human rights advocate globally and disgracefully abandoned our own values by torturing and demeaning our prisoners?
- Would we have a declared pre-emptive policy threatening any nation that might challenge our supremacy or interests anywhere on the planet or in space?
- Would we be developing a new generation of nuclear weapons at the same time as we accuse others of feeding nuclear proliferation?
- Would we be in nuclear confrontation with North Korea and Iran?
- Would we be daily driving our nation so deeply into debt that our economic future is very uncertain?
- Would we be trying to wall off hundreds of miles of borders and abandoning our tradition of welcoming the needy migrant in order to secure ourselves?
- Would we be calculating the size of toothpaste tube we can carry onto an airplane?
- Would we be any less secure?

The Amish community in Pennsylvania gave the nation an awe-inspiring example of compassion and forgiveness when they reached out to the family of the man who had killed their daughters, sharing prayer, food and financial resources with them – acknowledging that they shared in the tragic grief. In doing that, they defused the power of hatred that had been unleashed, giving an indelible testimony to the power of love to regenerate hope and re-build a shattered peace. Could we have done that for the families of the hijackers on 9/11? What difference might it have made? As I reflect on what might have been, I am left very sad. What in our response to the attacks of 9/11 marked us as the Christian nation so many among us like to claim we are? This was our chance to live up to the images of the “city on the hill,” or the “light on the lamp stand to give light to all” that are so treasured in our national religious mythology. It was squandered.

Would such an approach have “worked?” Would there be fewer people in the world than there are today who are bitterly committed to fighting the U.S. way of life? I am sure there would be and that our world would be immensely safer. Can I prove it? No.

Would the U.S. public have allowed our political leaders to take us down this path of law enforcement, forgiveness, healing and love? I am not sure – and that brings the question back home to each and all of us. Are we willing to live the Christian vision of loving forgiveness when it is painful – and to make it the guiding light of our foreign policy? Is being a “religious nation” a real possibility for us? And if it is not just an impossible phantasy, why did we not demand it of our leaders in the aftermath of 9/11? Why are we not demanding it now?

I extend my profound gratitude and admiration to the Amish of Pennsylvania for their witness to what is really possible for our humanity, living in faith, to achieve for the world. It can only be a sign of the sickness of our culture that we marginalize them as a quaint glimpse of a past left in the dust of our progress.

Posted by Jim Hug, SJ - President, Center of Concern.

Published: Friday, September 15, 2006

Dialogue in the Church

By Father Richard P. McBrien

The promotion of dialogue within and beyond the Catholic Church was one of the highest priorities of the Second Vatican Council. In recent years, a few commentators have been bemoaning the absence of dialogue in the Church, insisting that it is the only antidote to what they see as a growing polarization within the Church.

It should go without saying that dialogue is a good thing. Its opposite is monologue. No one likes to be subjected to a one-way conversation or to be a student in a course that does not permit questions, much less one where the raising of questions is considered a punishable offense.

That said, some recent calls for more dialogue in the Church have a troubling side. Oddly enough, these calls have come mainly from the more conservative side of the Catholic community.

These advocates of dialogue make two assumptions: first, that there are two roughly co-equal groups in conflict with one another in the Catholic Church --- liberals and ultra-conservatives --- while the broad center (in which they implicitly place themselves) is blessedly free of polarizing tendencies; and, second, that both sides are equally at fault because they are more interested in stereotyping the other than in entering into constructive conversation.

Both assumptions are subject to challenge. There are not two co-equal groups at logger-heads in the Catholic Church today, the one liberal and the other ultra-conservative. Liberal Catholics (by whatever name) constitute the great majority of today's most active Catholics. Many were formed by Vatican II and others have grown up in a Church shaped by it.

Like the council itself, they hold that the Church is the People of God and that they --- women and men alike --- have an integral role to play in its mission and ministries. They are generally happy with the liturgy as renewed and reformed by the council, except perhaps for some of the homilies and music. But they would not want to return to the Latin Mass or to a style of worship focused on the priest rather than the whole congregation.

Significantly, ultra-conservative Catholics, who have never been comfortable with the changes brought about by Vatican II, are a small, if often vocal, minority in the Church. This group has no numerical equivalency with the broad cross-section of Catholics who have been generally supportive of the council and its reforms.

While it is unfortunately the case that ultra-conservative Catholics sometimes create a hostile atmosphere in parishes and dioceses, directing their fire at pastors who do not observe the rubrics of the Mass in every detail or who support religious education programs that reflect modern theological, biblical and pedagogical scholarship, the same is generally not true of the broad cross-section of Catholics formed by Vatican II.

They may become exasperated and even angered by the various forms of harassment they receive from fellow Catholics on the far right, but they have no wish to drive them out of the Church --- nor to fight with them, for that matter.

The second assumption of today's pro-dialogue commentators is that dialogue between these two groups would be possible if both would just lay down their arms and agree to talk with one another in a mutually respectful way.

But if polarization occurs, as they say, in the absence of dialogue, dialogue, in turn, presupposes some measure of equality. Dialogue cannot happen if one side controls the agenda, the invitation list and the microphones, and also has the power to reward or punish participants. Dialogue requires a level playing field.

The unequal distribution of power in the Church today makes dialogue difficult, if not impossible. It came about because of the pattern of episcopal appointments and promotions that was operative during the previous pontificate.

The laity, who once had a say even in the election of popes, have long since been consigned to the lowest level of the ecclesiastical pyramid --- passive recipients of spiritual benefits and moral direction from on high.

This pyramidal system was reformed in principle by the Second Vatican Council, particularly with its doctrine of collegiality, but collegiality gave way in the previous pontificate to a restoration of centralized papal authority.

Today's internal conflicts are the result, in large part, of a deliberate pattern of episcopal appointments that has not only shifted the balance of power disproportionately in favor of one small faction in the Church, but has at the same time deliberately withheld pastoral authority from those in the Church's broad center --- pastorally adept moderates, of left and right alike, who could promote real dialogue in the Church.

Many look to Pope Benedict XVI in hope.

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