

Week of July 25, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

"The People of God"

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"

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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