NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Demoralization in the church

Richard McBrien | Nov. 8, 2010 Essays in Theology

[**Editor's Note:** Fr. Richard McBrien is recuperating from back surgery. Until he fully recovers, which we expect by the end of this school semester, we will be running "encore presentations" from Fr. McBrien's column archives. This column dates from June 2004.]

The May 27th issue of Origins (a collection of documents and speeches published weekly by Catholic News Service and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) contains two talks on the priesthood by Father Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominican order, given in April at the annual convention of the National Federation of Priests Councils.

Although I have never had the pleasure of meeting Father Radcliffe, he has an enviable reputation inside and outside the worldwide Dominican community. Many regard him as a man of extraordinary spiritual depth -- a compliment that is too often cheapened by over-use and indiscriminate application.

Perhaps it is because of Father Radcliffe's reputation that I found myself somewhat disappointed with the talks, notwithstanding their many splendid insights and the obviously healthy spirit and thoughtful tone that permeate them.

The first presentation, "Priests and the Crisis of Hope Within the Church," identifies three causes of demoralization among priests: first, the distance between the teaching Church and the experience of most ordinary Christians with whom the priest lives; second, the "acute polarization" that exists within the Catholic Church; and, third, the negative effects of the sexual-abuse scandals.

The problem with this analysis is that it begs some underlying questions.

First, why does a distance exist between the official teachings of the Church and so many "ordinary Christians," and why do so many priests agree with their parishioners on the matter?

Second, what is the cause of the polarization that currently divides the Catholic Church and creates the kind of demoralization, at both clerical and lay levels, of which Father Radcliffe speaks?

And, third, why did we have a sexual-abuse scandal? Was it simply a matter of "a few bad apples" in the priesthood (the same defense offered in response to charges of prisoner abuse in Iraq), or is there an overarching systemic problem as well?

Regarding the first cause of demoralization, Father Radcliffe asks: "How can we make our priestly lives with people and build community when we are seen as the public representatives of a moral vision that so many people either do not accept or find it almost impossible to live?"

The question is: Why can't they accept and live this "moral vision"? Are they simply "bad" Catholics? Do they reject these teachings, knowing them to be true, only because they are too difficult to apply in their own lives?

Is our only challenge, therefore, one of more effectively communicating the teachings, and then of inspiring the laity to put aside their selfishness and become more fully committed disciples of Christ?

Many engaged in priestly ministry or who are otherwise in touch with pastoral reality know that this is not the real challenge.

The problem is that many lay persons reject the teachings and do not abide by them in their daily lives because they believe those teachings to be wrong, in whole or in part. And many priests agree with that judgment. And so do many of the Church's theologians, religious, and pastoral ministers.

It is not helpful, therefore, to characterize the gap between official teachings and the thinking and behavior of "ordinary Christians" as "painful." The challenge is not to find ways to ease the pain, but to get at its root causes and, in the process, to determine if its source is internal or external.

If someone, for example, has a sharp pain in the foot because of a tumor pressing against the heel, the tumor needs to be removed. But if someone experiences foot pain because of a stone in the shoe, the solution is not surgery but removal of the stone.

Father Radcliffe told the priests that "if we are to survive between this rock and the hard place, then we need each other, the support of our fellow priests." But in what does such support consist?

Is it the formation of an independent group of priests, as happened in the archdiocese of Boston out of frustration with the former cardinal-archbishop there, or is it simply more frequent occasions for group prayer and clerical socializing as a manifestation of priestly "fraternity"?

Is it really possible to deal with the "pain" of demoralization without addressing its underlying causes?

If not, then we must be open to the possibility that the gap exists between certain official teachings and the thinking and behavior of many lay persons (and priests) because the teachings themselves are defective in whole or in part and need to be changed, just as two-thirds of the Papal Birth Control Commission once famously urged the late Pope Paul VI to change the Church's official teaching on contraception.

[Fr. Richard McBrien is the Crowley-O?Brien professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, Ind.]

© 2010 Richard P. McBrien. All rights reserved.

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Fr. McBrien's column, "Essays in Theology," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow the directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Essays in Theology" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/16/2014 - 11:23*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/demoralization-church

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup