

### An episcopate anything but excellent

Creativity and independence of mind are the kiss of death for those wishing to rise in the church

By RICHARD P. McBRIEN

National Catholic Reporter; Issue Date: September 8, 2006

This column bothers some readers when it occasionally says openly what many Catholics -- laity, religious, clergy, and, yes, even bishops and Vatican officials -- are saying privately among themselves. One of those privately voiced opinions concerns the quality of episcopal appointments made during the previous pontificate.

While the comments tend to focus on individual appointees, the damage to the hierarchy's credibility and pastoral effectiveness is not limited to those appointed and promoted within the system.

There is at least equal, if not greater, damage to the church in excluding from the hierarchy good priests who would have made excellent bishops were it not for their independence of mind, their creativity, their ability to think outside the box, their courage in differing with their ecclesiastical superiors, and their healthy relationships with the laity and brother priests.

In the past two decades and a half, bishops of that type have been appointed, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, when a particularly apt appointment is made, the laity, religious and clergy of a diocese rejoice and give thanks.

Unfortunately, the more common reaction when an episcopal appointment is announced has been either, "Who is he and where is he from?" or "Oh, no, not him!" Every time over the past several years that I have shared this observation, whether publicly or privately, I have had the same general reaction, namely, one of strong agreement.

I thought of this matter again when reading a review by a Notre Dame colleague, Professor Maura Ryan, of Fr. Charles Curran's new book, *Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian*. The review appears in the July 31-Aug. 7 issue of *America* magazine.

Prof. Ryan writes: "It is no small irony that the Vatican's action [in removing Charles Curran's right to teach as a Catholic theologian at The Catholic University of America] gave Curran international visibility and opportunities he might never have had otherwise.

"He is widely acknowledged as one of the most prominent and prolific scholars of Catholic moral theology today. Yet because he was barred from speaking in Catholic dioceses, is not recognized as an authority within the church and was not hired by any Catholic college or university after leaving Catholic University, he has served the church as a theologian primarily from the outside.

"One does not have to agree with Curran's positions to wonder how great a loss his professional status represents, not only for him, but for Catholic higher education and the intellectual life of the institutional church."

Prof. Ryan's observations are also applicable to the matter of episcopal appointments. It's not that good priests who have been passed over have been prevented from doing wonderful pastoral work and from making extraordinary contributions to the life of the church and to so many of its members. Every diocese has such priests, and they are recognized for who they are and for the good they have accomplished over the course of their ministry.

But they never were considered safe enough to be appointed to the hierarchy. Like Fr. Curran, their potential for effective pastoral leadership in service of the wider church was never realized beyond the parish level.

There is yet another category of passed-over priests -- in this case, auxiliary bishops who were appointed during the pontificate of Paul VI (1963-78) but who, after his death and the Vatican's subsequent shift in direction, remained stuck, as it were, in the auxiliary status, never to be assigned a diocese of their own.

Those who know what has been going on in the Catholic church these past 25 years or so can readily identify the names of those auxiliary bishops -- some still living and active, others retired, and still others deceased.

Other Catholics might be tempted to believe that most of the current crop of post-1978 bishops were appointed because they were, in fact, among the best qualified candidates for the episcopacy. But they would probably also have agreed with the senior President Bush who, when he announced his appointment of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court, characterized him as "the best qualified at this time."

It is still too early to tell if the current pope's pattern of appointments will differ from those of his immediate predecessor, but it is interesting that the only palpable uneasiness thus far has been expressed by those elated by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's election last year (see, for example, the February issue of *First Things*).

Fr. Richard McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.