

# Ecclesiological Perspectives on Church Reform

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In the last four centuries of Roman Catholicism, questions of church reform and renewal have been tainted by Catholic–Protestant polemics. Luther’s vigorous assertion that the church was an *ecclesia semper reformanda* led to Catholic counter-assertions regarding the church as a *societas perfecta* possessing an indefectible holiness. Though important exceptions would emerge over the next four centuries,<sup>1</sup> the dominant Catholic counter-reformation ecclesiology that emerged in response to the reformers seemed to preclude any consideration of church reform beyond that of its individual members. In 1950 the Dominican theologian Yves Congar published his controversial study on the possibility of reform in the church, *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l’Église*.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the fact that the Vatican intervened to prevent future translations of this work, the book’s central theme became an important topic at Vatican II. Pope John XXIII placed the topic at the forefront of conciliar reflection when he explicitly called for an *aggiornamento*, bringing the church “up-to-date,” in his address at the opening of the council.<sup>3</sup>

A fresh consideration of the possibility of substantive church reform was made possible by fundamental shifts in Catholic ecclesiology that found their way into the conciliar documents:

First, a heightened appreciation for the eschatological dimension of the church as not just a church of pilgrims but a pilgrim church made it easier to suggest that if the church does not “achieve its perfection until the glory of heaven” (*LG* # 48) then substantive ecclesial reform must be possible. Second, the recovery of the pneumatological foundations of the church furthered this development by viewing institutional change as potentially the work of the Spirit and not necessarily a departure from immutable ecclesial structures. Third, in 1964 Pope Paul VI issued his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, in which he encouraged the value of respectful dialogue both within the church and between the church and the world. This theme would be adopted in the council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. These new perspectives allowed the council to address the possibility of church reform within an alternative theological framework. In their Decree on Ecumenism the council bishops wrote:

Christ summons the church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth. Consequently, if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way (*UR* # 6).

Since the council, there has been widespread agreement among theologians and church leaders regarding the necessity and value of the reforms called for by the council and enacted, with varying degrees of success, in the fundamental revision of the church’s sacramental rites, the creation of the world synod of bishops, the suppression of minor orders, the restoration of the permanent diaconate, the encouragement of lay ministries and the promulgation of both the new Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Some church commentators suggest that these reforms represent, in many instances, only compromise developments. They insist that the post-conciliar reforms have not gone far enough and that, particularly in the face of the recent clerical sexual abuse scandal exacerbated by the gross malfeasance of church leadership, further structural or organizational reform is still needed. This conference's focus on the merits of developing a professional ethic in the church is, I believe, largely in keeping with this viewpoint. However, others in the church, including some influential bishops and Vatican officials, have questioned the continued focus on institutional or organizational reform, contending that the energy of the church today needs to be redirected from structural church reform to the church's mission to be an evangelizing presence in the world.<sup>4</sup>

It is my contention that it is an error to place in opposition the two imperatives of church reform and church mission. In the first part of this paper I will argue that an understanding of the church as a universal sacrament of salvation and the church as seed of the kingdom of God presuppose an intrinsic connection between the church's own structural reality and its mission in the world. Structural church reform cannot be dismissed as a mere left wing agenda, nor can it be placed in opposition to the church's mission in the world. Structural church reform is essential precisely in order that the church might better fulfill its mission in the world. In part two I will propose that since justice is constitutive of the church's mission, the church's reality as sacrament of salvation and seed of the kingdom demands that the church's teaching on social justice be applied to the church itself as the basis for ongoing structural church reform.

## **Retrieving Key Conciliar Teachings on the Nature and Mission of the Church**

As a way of developing the ecclesiological connections between church reform and church mission I would like to highlight two themes found in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*: the church as universal sacrament of salvation, and the church as seed of the kingdom of God.

### **The Church as Sacrament**

Catholicism has a long tradition of theological reflection on the place of the sacraments in the life of the church. The council, however, recovered a more ancient Christian conviction that the church not only administered the sacraments, it was itself a kind of sacrament.<sup>5</sup> Already in the first document considered by the council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, we find this statement:

This work of human redemption and perfect glorification of God, foreshadowed by the wonders which God performed among the people of the Old Testament, Christ the Lord completed principally in the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby “dying, he destroyed our death and rising, restored our life.” For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole church (SC # 5).

This passage highlights the paschal mystery and thus already suggests the council’s consistent emphasis on the church as a sacrament of salvation. In article 9 of *Lumen gentium* the council notes that God “...has, however, willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might

acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.” It is in this corporate work of salvation that the church can be a sign to the world:

All those, who in faith look towards Jesus, the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of saving unity. In order to extend to all regions of the earth, it enters into human history, though it transcends at once all time and all boundaries between peoples. (LG # 9).

Later in article 48 the church is referred to as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (Cf. AG # 1, 5). This theme would be carried forward in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. That remarkable document firmly situated the church within the world as a sign to the world of God’s redemptive love.

But wherein lies the sacramentality of the church? If bread and wine are essential to the sacrament of the eucharist because they serve as efficacious signs of a new sacramental reality, then what is it in the church that functions as an efficacious sign? The answer can only be, everything that comprises the church in its visible reality. The church certainly serves as a sacrament before the world in its members’ ordinary life witness to the values of the gospel, but also in its church law, offices and ecclesial practices—all of these visible manifestations of the church participate in the church’s sacramental reality. This leads to a second question: if the whole of the church’s visible reality participates in the church’s sacramentality, what does this visible reality actually signify, that is, what does the church as sacrament “make present” to the world? In the language of scholastic sacramental theology, what is the *res* of the church as sacrament? Seeking an answer to this question leads us to a second conciliar theme, the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God.

## **The Church and the Kingdom of God**

At a relatively late stage in the history of *Lumen gentium*, a proposal was made by several Latin American bishops to incorporate into the document the biblical metaphor of the reign or kingdom of God. Although this proposal came too late to allow the theme to be integrated into the whole of the document, it does appear in several significant passages. For example, in article 5 of *Lumen gentium* the council asserted boldly that the church does not exist for its own sake but in service of the coming reign of God:

Henceforward the church, equipped with the gifts of its founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, *the seed and the beginning of that kingdom* (LG # 5, emphasis is mine).

Later in that same document the council refers to the church as a “messianic people” and asserts that as such the church’s destiny is realized in that

kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time when Christ our life, will appear and “creation itself also will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons and daughters of God” (LG # 9).

Here again the power of the biblical image of the kingdom of God, an image that so dominated Jesus’ own preaching, is evoked. In the teaching of the council, the kingdom of God, which was manifested in human history as Jesus Christ, continues as a force in history and will find its consummation only in the eschaton. The church exists in human history as “the seed” and beginning of this kingdom.

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Redemptoris missio*, gave this theme a much fuller exposition. The pope stresses the inseparability of Jesus and the kingdom of God. He begins by developing the biblical image of the kingdom of God in the teaching and ministry of Jesus, noting that the “proclamation and establishment of God's kingdom” constituted the essential purpose of Jesus’ mission (RM # 13). Jesus revealed the kingdom, not just in his teaching, but “in his actions and his own person (RM # 14).” Central to the manifestation of the kingdom of God are Jesus’ ministries of healing and forgiving, ministries that result in transformed human relationships. The kingdom thereby grows “as people slowly learn to love, forgive and serve one another (RM # 15).”

The kingdom's nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings—with one another and with God. The kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God's activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness (RM # 15).

The pope warns against overly reductive interpretations of the kingdom of God which focus exclusively on the socio-economic and political spheres of human existence without reference to their transcendent horizon. This last point is crucial; the pope does not deny the social and political dimensions of the kingdom of God but only the removal of any transcendent reference (RM # 17). At the same time he warns against completely severing the relationship between the kingdom of God, Christ and the church (RM # 18).

As the pope looks to the origins of Christianity, he sees service to the kingdom of God as the very *raison d' être* of the early church. He reiterates the teaching of the council affirming that

the church is a seed of the kingdom to the extent that it preaches Christ and promotes gospel values.

### **The Church as Sacrament of the Kingdom**

In his encyclical on mission, the pope went beyond the conciliar documents by explicitly considering the relationship between these two themes, the church as sacrament and the church as seed of the kingdom of God. He wrote:

The many dimensions of the kingdom of God do not weaken the foundations and purposes of missionary activity, but rather strengthen and extend them. The Church is the sacrament of salvation for all humankind, and her activity is not limited only to those who accept her message. She is a dynamic force in mankind's journey toward the eschatological kingdom, and is the sign and promoter of gospel values (RM # 20).

Combining the two themes of church as sacrament of salvation and church as seed and sign of the kingdom, it is possible to speak of the church as a sacrament of the kingdom of God. As such the church must be vigilant to insure that its whole visible reality—its institutions, offices, and practices—functions as effective signs of that kingdom.

By means of this somewhat lengthy excursus on the teaching of the council and John Paul II I have tried to lay out the theological foundations for what follows: a theological argument for the necessity of ongoing structural church reform. The argument proceeds in several steps. First, we begin with the kingdom of God as a divine, historical dynamism, fully manifest in Christ, which works toward the transformation of all human relationships. It is evident wherever people “learn to love, forgive and serve one another.” This transformative divine presence in history can never be captured in any one ideology for it will find its final consummation only in the eternity of divine communion. Second, the church is an efficacious

sign or sacrament of this kingdom. It serves the liberative presence of God in history. Third, the church's status as sacrament and seed of God's reign is grounded in its total visible reality; it is only as a visible, historical reality that the church can be sacrament of salvation and seed of the kingdom. Fourth, this visible reality, as the indispensable basis of the church's status as sacrament and seed of the kingdom, is comprised of the church's teaching, institutional structures, communal practices and policies, and the witness to holiness of its members. In other words, to assert the sacramentality of the church is to assert that all things pertaining to the church's visibility matter. Church structures and policies can never be merely functional, merely "in-house" realities for a church that claims to be itself a sacrament of the kingdom. Any aspect of the church that makes it present to the world shares in its sacramentality. To the extent that these visible ecclesial realities are in keeping with the values of the kingdom of God, they share in the church's sacramentality. To the extent that any church structure, teaching or policy is counter to the kingdom, it diminishes the church's sacramentality.

It is the commitment to the sacramentality of the church that renders questions of institutional/structural church reform more than a matter of church housekeeping or the rearrangement of ecclesiastical furniture. For the church to be an effective sacrament of the kingdom of God one must be able to see in the whole visible reality of the church, a "seed and sign" of that kingdom. When the visage of the church before the world reflects instead values and practices counter to the kingdom of God, the church's sacramentality is thereby compromised, and its mission undermined.

A fifth step in this argument moves from the common teaching of both Vatican II and Pope John Paul II that the church is a sacrament of salvation, a sign and seed of the kingdom, to an important development in the teaching of the 1971 world synod of bishops. In the introduction

to their statement, “Justice in the World,”<sup>6</sup> the bishops wrote that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” In that document the bishops boldly claimed that the church must not only offer to the world its rich social teaching, it must embody that teaching in its structures and practices:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church itself (# 3).

This passage suggests that one way to enhance the church’s mission as a sacrament of the kingdom of God in the world is for the church to embody in its own structures and practices the very gospel values it wishes to offer to modern society.

## **The Church as Visible Sign of Gospel Justice**

Following the lead of the 1971 synodal document, let us consider some applications of Catholic social teaching to the life of the church that might serve as the basis for church reform.

1) “Justice in the World” dared to apply the church’s developed social teaching on economic justice to its own policies and procedures for the administration of the temporal goods of the church as an expression of its solidarity with the poor. At the minimum, this solidarity with the poor would challenge the sometimes affluent lifestyle of the “leadership class” in the church. In an era of unfortunate church closings in diocese after diocese, ostentatious church offices and episcopal residences often appear as a scandalous countersign to the church’s commitment to the poor. In the face of a US economy that was sent reeling just two years ago by

a series of corporate scandals in which dubious accounting practices proliferated, the effective witness of the church would also seem to require a much greater transparency and accountability in its own financial affairs. The church's administration of its temporal goods must be a witness to the world of what responsible stewardship of financial resources might mean.

2) "Justice in the World" applied the Catholic teaching on the laborer's right to a just wage to its own treatment of those who work for the church. Far too many Catholic employees in diocesan offices, parishes and schools receive considerably less than a fair wage and often work without the kind of basic contractual protection and benefits assumed for commensurate positions in the private sector. The unionization of church employees is frequently discouraged as employees are told that their work should be viewed as a "vocation" or "ministry" that therefore cannot be compared to correlative positions in the secular business world. This avoids the fact, however, that many of these church employees, unlike the clergy who often hire them, have families to provide for. Moreover, while women constitute the majority of lay church employees in both schools and parishes, they often encounter a church version of the "glass ceiling" as regards key positions for which they are canonically eligible. Standardized personnel policies, such as established procedures for job performance reviews or the adjudication of employee grievances, are still the exception rather than the norm.

3) Catholic social teaching has consistently emphasized the importance of encouraging authentic forms of community constituted by relationships and institutional structures predicated on the dignity of each human person. Social and political relationships as those between government officials and the governed, must be characterized by dialogue and mutual respect. The gospel would seem to challenge any social relationships based on a social stratification or elitism that would undermine the dignity of all persons.

In the light of this teaching the Catholic church must seriously examine its own tendency to apply titles and other ecclesiastical honorifics to those called to church service, much as it must concern itself with the real dangers of ecclesiastical careerism. When diplomats and curial officials are given episcopal titles without authentic pastoral charges to living communities of faith, when loyal priests are made “monsignor” in recognition of service and/or church loyalty, ordained ministries of service risk losing their evangelical character and the conditions are created for a kind of ecclesial elitism or clericalism. The practice of transferring bishops from diocese to diocese, a practice roundly condemned in the early church as constituting an ecclesiastical “divorce” between a bishop and his church, encourages bishops in “minor sees” to make decisions with an eye toward, not the needs of their flock, but the possibility of ecclesiastical advancement.

4) Catholic social teaching stresses the value of political participation and need for open civic discourse. The United States was built on a tradition of civil discourse. Yet this discourse has been corrupted in the last few decades by what can only be called the “politics of demonization.” This failure of conversation is often played out on various cable news networks and talk radio stations where the demonizing of one’s opponents and the imputation of ill will to those with whom one disagrees substitutes for respectful public conversation. When serious public debate fails to go beyond petty name calling and the application of “spin” to every partisan issue, our country moves another step further away from the participatory democracy that our founders had in mind.

This crisis of civil discourse makes it all the more important that the church, in its structures and practices, embody another form of discourse, one characterized by open and charitable dialogue. The Second Vatican Council, recognizing that Christians of good will may

at times disagree with one another regarding the demands of the gospel, exhorted Christians to “try to guide each other by sincere dialogue in a spirit of mutual charity and with a genuine concern for the common good above all” (GS, # 43). Authentic dialogue means neither demonizing opposing views nor granting the equal truth of all possible positions. Authentic dialogue does not mean compromising one’s convictions; it presumes that one will give an impassioned account of one’s convictions, of what one holds to be true. But authentic dialogue does demand the courage to genuinely hear the other, and to be open to the possibility that one’s conversation partner may bring new insight, and perhaps even expose flaws in one’s own position. When bishops refuse to meet with church groups who may be critical of church policies or even its doctrine, they offer a clear counter-example of the failure of church leadership to heed the demands of open and charitable dialogue.

The 1971 synod also called for greater participation of the laity in church decision-making. In the recent post-synodal exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*,<sup>7</sup> on the office of the bishop, Pope John Paul II considers the exercise of church governance within the framework of communion. The document advocates “open collaboration” and “a type of reciprocal interplay between what a bishop is called to decide with personal responsibility for the good of the church entrusted to his care and the contribution that the faithful can offer him through consultative bodies such as the diocesan synod, the presbyteral council, the episcopal council and the pastoral council” PG # 44). The pope asserts that

the church is an organically structured community which finds expression in the coordination of different charisms, ministries and services for the sake of attaining the common end, which is salvation. The bishop is responsible for bringing about this unity in diversity by promoting, as was stated in the synodal assembly, a collaborative effort which makes it possible for all to journey together along the common path of faith and mission” (PG # 44).

Yet further on he states that

if communion expresses the church's essence, then it is normal that the spirituality of communion will tend to manifest itself in both the personal and community spheres, awakening ever new forms of participation and shared responsibility in the faithful of every category. Consequently, the bishop will make every effort to develop within his particular church structures of communion and participation which make it possible to listen to the Spirit, who lives and speaks in the faithful, in whatever the same Spirit suggests for the true good of the church” (PG 44).

One often hears the slogan, “the church is not a democracy,” yet almost never does one hear its necessary ecclesiological correlate, “neither is the church a monarchy or an oligarchy.” In fact the church cannot be compared to any single political model for it is, uniquely, a spiritual communion constituted as such by the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the life of the church, unlike an oligarchy, power is not to be located in a select few. Ecclesologically, power proceeds from baptism as a gift of the Spirit and can be defined as *the capacity to fulfill one’s baptismal call and engage in effective action in service of the church’s life and mission*. The power we receive through Christian initiation enables us to fulfill our calling as disciples of Jesus. We are empowered to share the good news of Jesus Christ, to pursue holiness, to love our neighbor, to care for the least, to work for justice, and to build up the body of Christ through the exercise of our particular gifts in service of the church. Power cannot be considered apart from a concrete ecclesial relationship, whether that relationship is constituted by sacramental initiation or ordination.

If the church is not an oligarchy it is also not a liberal democratic polity; the church does not, and ought not, make decisions based on the aggregate majority of private opinions on a given matter. As a spiritual communion bound to discern the will of God, the church should avoid any kind of majoritarianism. Its task is to cultivate a “holy conversation” in which each

participant actualizes the *sensus fidei* (supernatural instinct for the faith) they received at baptism in order to discern the will of God rather than their private desires or preferences. These ecclesial discernment processes will acknowledge the indispensable role of ordained church leadership as unique guardians of the apostolic faith while also remaining open to the prophetic voice that so often emerges outside of established institutional structures.

5) Finally, the demand for structural reform in the church would seem to require a thorough implementation of the principle of subsidiarity that first appeared in Catholic social teaching in *Quadragesimo anno*. Put simply, the principle of subsidiarity holds that higher levels of a society should not take on tasks and functions that can be accomplished better at lower levels. Pope Pius XII extended the sphere of application of this principle to the church when he observed in 1946 that this principle, “valid for social life in all its grades” was valid “also for the life of the church without prejudice to its hierarchical structure.”<sup>8</sup> The principle was not explicitly mentioned in the documents of Vatican II, though several commentators believe it is implicit in several passages.<sup>9</sup>

The application of subsidiarity to the life of the church requires that we transpose the socio-political principle into the ecclesiological framework determined by the integrity of the local church “in and out of which” the universal church is manifested (LG # 8). If we admit that, at least analogically, it can be applied to the church, we might re-formulate that principle as follows: *the pastoral authority with direct responsibility for a local community must have primary responsibility for pastoral ministry within that community and is expected to address, without external intervention, the pastoral issues that emerge there. Only when these issues appear insoluble at the local level and/or threaten the faith and unity of the church universal should one expect the intervention of “higher authority.”*

Sound ecclesiology demands the preservation of the full integrity of the local church as the concrete presence of the one church of Christ in that place. Any exercise of authority at a level beyond the local can never be undertaken in a way that undermines that local church's integrity. The exercise of "higher authority" must always be a means toward preserving the integrity of the local church and its communion with the other churches.

Richard McBrien once observed that one of the most significant features of Vatican II's important document, *Gaudium et spes*, was that it shifted Catholic social teaching from the framework of moral theology and the virtue of "justice" to that of ecclesiology and the church's mission in the world.<sup>10</sup> While the claim might be overstated, it is essentially valid. The call for justice is indeed a constitutive dimension of the church's mission to be a universal sacrament of salvation and a first seed and sign of the kingdom of God before the world. To the extent that the church's own structures and practices are viewed as unjust, its mission is compromised. The statement of the bishops in "Justice in the World" over thirty years ago, remains valid: "anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes" (# 3).

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<sup>1</sup> I have in mind such important figures as Jacques Bossuet, Johann Adam Möhler, John Henry Newman, Adrien Gréa and Hermann Schell.

<sup>2</sup> Yves Congar, *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1969, originally published in 1950).

<sup>3</sup> For the English translation of the pope's opening address see Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), V: 710-19.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Joseph Ratzinger, "A Company in Constant Renewal" in *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996),

133-56. According to Peter Feuerherd, this viewpoint is held by the influential American Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, Francis George. Feuerherd writes: “One of George’s favorite themes is that the church has spent enough time focusing on itself and now must spend more time on the work of conversion. He sees evangelization as the solution to perennial problems such as the looming priest shortage.” See Peter Feuerherd, “Chicago Catholic: A Profile of Cardinal Francis George,” *Commonweal* 131 (January 14, 2004), quoted from the electronic version found at <[http://69.93.235.8/article.php?id\\_article=826](http://69.93.235.8/article.php?id_article=826)>.

<sup>5</sup> The retrieval of this insight was accomplished by a number of important theological works being published just prior to or during the council itself. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1963); Otto Semmelroth, *Church and Sacrament* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1965); Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Crossroad, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> In *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, David J. O’Brien and Thomas Shannon, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis, Origins* 33 (November 6, 2003): 353-92.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Pius XII made this statement in an address to newly created cardinals, *AAS* 38 (1946): 144-5. He reaffirmed the ecclesial implications of the principle of subsidiarity in an address to the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate in 1957. Cf. *AAS* 49 (1957): 926-8.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Komonchak, “Subsidiarity and the Church: The State of the Question,” *The Jurist* 48 (1988): 298-349, at 309-12. It is disappointing that . *Pastores Gregis* referred to the ecclesial application of this principle as “ambiguous” (PG # 56).

<sup>10</sup> Richard McBrien, “Catholic Social Action,” *National Catholic Reporter* (March 3, 1987): 7-8.