



What is God Really Like?

By DENNIS J. GEANEY

I just sat down to eat when the young woman across from me asked that question. She was sitting next to her mother and her husband was at the other side of her mother. They were all strangers to me until that Sunday afternoon when I conducted for them and others, an afternoon of recollection followed by the Eucharistic meal.

So the question, "What is God like," was simply continuing the afternoon of reflection to a supper table dialogue.

The circumstances of the afternoon were quite unique. It was not a rehearsal, but a house with a storefront in the heart of one of the nation's largest Negro ghettos. The woman seated at my right was a Negro, but she was one of a small minority.

There were mostly white people who had left their white suburban or city parish on a Sunday to come to this liturgical oasis where people could break bread, listen to the word of God, sing lively songs with a group who needed no encouragement to respond. I even had a few nuns who left their suburban convent to get a taste of the spiritual life in a freer and less structured atmosphere.

There were no do-gooders in the lot, no one with a pretense, no one struggling with the race problem. Everyone had resolved this for themselves long before they came. There was no point to refer to racial conflict in the talks, since it was not a reality in their lives. We were interested in coming to know God and find Him in each other.

This was the background to the question that started the evening meal conversation on talks. I had explained that God was like a party. I got the idea from two references in the gospel, "The Kingdom of God is like a marriage feast..."

At a wedding feast the people are having fun. They are lined up at the bar, older folks are sitting down chatting, younger ones are dancing. Everyone is really living. Heaven will be living life to the hilt, but there will be no bar, or dancing.

Yet, I really don't know what heaven will be like. Our Lord could not really tell us because we are only capable of understanding human situations. He was really saying that a wedding feast is the happiest human situation imaginable, so heaven will be the same, but in a different order which cannot be described in human terms.

In our understanding of the gospel, we should not confine our earthly images of heaven to wedding parties. This was the big life event for the Jews.

The Irish wakes of my early childhood could be an image of heaven. The men in the kitchen with the clay pipes and the whiskey were spinning yarns and enjoying themselves as they had not done in the grim interval of long work hours since the last wake. There can be

many images of heaven patterned after the Jewish wedding feast. For me, explaining about heaven over good food and across from people who did not have a phony bone in their bodies was heaven.

God is a party in the sense that He is three persons. These persons are always in relationship with one another. The Father and the Son are in a relationship of love which is expressed in a third person. God is a community of love which we could call a party.

God's Social Presence

I asked the young wife across the table how God was present to us here. In such situations I am not a patient listener. I answer my own questions.

Christ was present at the Mass, not simply in the Eucharistic species, but in the assembly of people. He was in us in a real and special way. Now as we talk about Him with love, He is present in another way. "Where two or three are gathered together..."

Somehow, as we come to talk and share across the table, love

is born. This is a reality that is beyond either of us. It is the product of the fusion of our minds and hearts. Is not this what lovers mean when they say that their love for each other is bigger than both of them?

This really set my new friends to really thinking. The husband asked if this were not pantheism where God is everything but not apart from it. The wife moved the discussion to Christ's heavenly body and the absence of bodies by the Father and the Spirit.

It is almost a week since this event. I feel that I am back on earth and no one is asking me what God or heaven is like. I am back on the job like the housewife, the printer, and the nurse who left the world of pedestrian concerns and caught a glimpse of heaven in an upper room of a crowded ghetto and across a makeshift dining room table in a storefront.

Without such occasional encounters I feel many of us could not keep alive spiritually which means, come to terms with the hidden, but truly living God.

Many times I have told this story. The place was Ithaca, New York. The time, a Sunday evening in summer about 8:00 in the late 1930s.

I was walking home from the hospital, down the main street. A tall young man, about 23, was leaning against a laundry truck watching me. It seemed curious to be scrutinized so intently by a stranger. The thought struck me: "Drunk or unbalanced."

As I came even with him he stepped forward and said: "Are you a Catholic priest?" "I am." "Could I talk with you sometime?" "I'm going back to the rectory. Can you come now?" "Good!" He turned to the truck driver and said: "I'll talk with you later."

When we sat down in the office, with customary directness I asked: "What's on your mind?" "I want to know how to get back to the Church," he answered unhappily.

"Are you a Catholic?" "I was." "What do you mean?" "Oh, not! Not that I know of."

"Are you married outside the Church?" "No, I'm not married at all." "Well, what do you mean? How can I get back into the Church? What's the story?" The story was impressive...

"I'm a student at Cornell University, and I live in a fraternity house with thirty fellows. My father is not a Catholic. My mother is. There has never been any trouble about religion in the family. I went to the Catholic grade school, and to a public high school. But I haven't been to Mass or to Holy Communion since I came to Cornell three years ago."

"Not even on Christmas or Easter?" "No, not even then." "Do you really want to get back to the Sacraments and to Sunday Mass?" "I sure do! That's why I'm here. What do I have

to do?" "There's no difficulty. I'll help you with your Confession now; and you can go to Holy Communion tomorrow morning. Then just be regular in the practice of your Faith. By the way, what ever gave you the idea of coming back to the Church?"

He replied: "It's kind of strange, Father. I live in a frat house with thirty fellows. As far as I know, no one knows I'm a Catholic. I certainly haven't given any evidence of it. A couple of weeks ago, some one put three or four Catholic pamphlets on my desk. At first I thought it was a joke, and I didn't pay any attention to them. But one day, I didn't have anything else to read, so I picked one up — and IT STARTED ME THINKING."

"It started me thinking." The result of those few pamphlets was a young man returned to Confession and Holy Communion; returned to God. He was around for Holy Communion the next morning. He persevered in his return. This is just one example of the many wonderful things that used to happen through the printed word.

I suspect that if the twenty year old son of that student were to pick many of the Catholic magazines and pamphlets today, he would be little interested in reconciliation with the Church. He would hardly recognize the Catholic Church with all the soft-peddling about her uniqueness and her teaching authority. He might call the Press to publicize his rejection of his draft status. He might quit class to go a-picketing. But he would be little concerned about the uniqueness of the Catholic Church. This has been veiled by a vague Catholicism which hides the knowledgeable acceptance of God's revelation.

Despite the clarity of Vatican II's documents, on THE CHURCH we will have to endure for a decade or more the

trauma of anti-stability, anti-certainty, anti-authority, anti-Catholicism within the Church itself. Most revolutions explode in extremes, and the revolution after Vatican II is no exception.

I sometimes wonder if these anti-Catholic Church Catholic writers have an expurgated edition of the Council's documents. My own ten dollar edition with large print reads clearly: "Christ, the one Mediator, established and ceaselessly sustains here on earth His Holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a VISIBLE structure... This is the unique Church of Christ which in the Creed we avow as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. After His Resurrection Our Saviour handed her over to Peter to be shepherded, commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her... This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure. These elements, however, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity" (Documents of Vatican II — THE CHURCH — No. 8. Unexpurgated edition. Editor: Walter Abbott, S.J.)

The term "subsists" is neither weakening nor denying the historic concept of the Catholic Church. It develops revealed doctrine of the Church. It does not deny the uniqueness of the Church.

The old Act of Faith is beautiful and soul satisfying: "... I believe all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches, because you have revealed them. You who can neither deceive nor be deceived."



Spectrum Of Opinion

At Our House®

Patron of Press Was Fine Writer

By Mary Tinley Daly

A recent news story in the Catholic press, commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the birth in France of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists, intrigued the journalists at our house.

"Didn't know we had a patron saint," commented the Head of the House, "though I can think of no lot in greater need."

So we did a bit of reading, first introduction to this particular St. Francis. What a patron, what a saint!

Termed "the favorite saint of modern times" this Bishop of Geneva, Doctor of the Church and co-founder of the Order of the Visitation, handled theological and ecclesiastical problems following the council of Trent (1545-1563) quite similar to those following Vatican II. He scrutinized fitness of candidates for the priesthood, engaged in public debate with Calvinist ministers hostile to the Catholic Church, established schools and outlined a plan for the spiritual formation of youth.

On the "emerging layman" theme, he organized a confraternity composed exclusively of lay people for the purpose of teaching Christian doctrine; set forth clearly and unmistakably the belief in a spiritually compatible with life in the world, writing in contrast to the works of those contemporary authors who regarded perfection attainable only by withdrawal from the world.

His Newsletter

In journalistic vein, while working as a missionary in unfriendly territory where his life was threatened in the late 1500's he inaugurated what we today would call a "newsletter." Each week he wrote a short article, presenting in a simple and direct manner some doctrine of faith. In lieu of mass production, these short messages were hand-copied by his followers and distributed widely with the result that some 72,000 souls were brought into the Catholic Church through the Saint's efforts.

St. Francis' charity might well be emulated by journalists and others. On the subject of ridicule, he asked, "Who gives us the right to amuse ourselves in this way at the expense of others? Should we like to be trobled and have all our faculties dissected by the razor of the tongue?"

He was a humble man and his plan of life was simple, even when he was a Bishop, making visits on foot, ministering to the poor, preaching more than 4,000 sermons, (too many his father thought), and in a style not filled with Greek and Latin words as was the custom of the day.

Of his preaching, Francis wrote, "I knew not how to refuse, so dear to me was that word of our Lord, 'Give to everyone that asketh of thee.'" While he was Bishop, he retained one small dark room and called it "Francis' place. All the rest of the house is the Bishop's."



Conversational Style

About 100 of his letters remain, according to the New Catholic Encyclopedia. Those on spiritual direction give an insight into his method. In them he points out in an easy, conversational style the sure way to God.

Of his 26 volumes, the best known is probably, "The Introduction to a Devout Life," first edition published in 1608, translated into many languages, and as pertinent to a man or woman living in 1967 as it was those living hundreds of years ago.

In the introduction, St. Francis says, "My intention is to write for those who have to live in the world and who, according to their state, to all outward appearance have to lead an ordinary life; and who, often enough, will not think of undertaking a devout life, considering it impossible. No one, they believe, ought to aspire to the plan of Christian piety while surrounded by the affairs of the world."

In it he shows how "a strong and resolute person may live in the world without being tainted by it, (may) find spiritual springs amid its salt waters... I write about the devout life without being devout myself, though I certainly desire to be so, and it is my desire for devotion that encourages me to write."

Bringing devotion into the realm of the ordinary reader, St. Francis writes — journalistically if you will:

"Ostriches never fly, hens fly sometimes but clumsily and not very high, but eagles, doves and swallows soar upwards swiftly and frequently."

"In the same way sinners never fly towards God but travel on the earth seeking only earthly things. Those who are good but not yet devout do fly sometimes on the wings of good deeds, but slowly and ungracefully. Those who are devout soar on high to God frequently and readily."

"No one, then, who fails to keep God's commandments can be counted either good or devout, for to be good one must have charity, while to be devout one must not only have charity but practice it cheerfully and with alacrity."

Wants The Church

A Launching Pad, Not Bomb Shelter

Des Moines — (RNS) — The head of the Reformed Church in America told laymen of the denomination that the Christian church holds the key to the future and should be regarded as a "launching pad — not as a bomb shelter."

Dr. Harold Schut of Scotia, N.Y., president of the Reformed General Synod, said he saw the Christian church as a stepping-off place for things to be done in the future, rather than a refuge from fears and prejudices of the past.

Letters to the Editor

Thanks Courier Readers

Dear Editor:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank you, sincerely, for the splendid article in your newspaper (Oct. 27) regarding my work with Father Volz at the Phuoc Thang Orphanage in South Vietnam.

The response from your readers has been wonderful—their generosity tremendous — and above all the ultimate results most gratifying.

I received replies from Elmira, Corning, Owego, Red Creek and many other areas. I will answer each letter and contribute personally as quickly as time permits. The organization OPERATION MORALE has officially adopted this project as a part of their work and have assured me of their fullest cooperation in making it a success.

Father Volz wrote telling me of the need for financial support in hopes that the good sisters will have ample funds to feed the children of the Phuoc Thang Orphanage. He relates how the Marines are voluntarily contributing personal funds to THE CHAPEL FUND for this purpose. If there are any among your readers who feel they would like to contribute to this fund, they may write directly or send their contributions either as a single gift or a continuing gift to:

—Brother Francis Capuchin, Franciscan Fathers, Geneva, N.Y.

Fond Memories

Editor —

Bringing back fond memories was an article entitled "Recollection of Holy Redeemer School Days" by Mrs. George Boland of Canandaigua (Nov. 10 Courier).

I shall never forget Monsignor E. William Stauder, Sr., Robertine, Sr. Ludwig, Fr. Raymond Wahl, Fr. William Schifferli and all the other sisters at Holy Redeemer.

I began at Holy Redeemer as a young child but was transferred to another school when my family moved. Still, I was able to attend the Religious Instruction class. I always looked forward to this-hour each week.

There isn't much I can add to Mrs. Boland's wonderful contribution except to say that if asked who I would recommend to be saints — I'd nominate Fr. Stauder and Sr. Robertine.

Six years ago I had occasion to visit the rectory at Holy Redeemer to obtain a copy of my Baptismal Certificate. The only new items and furniture in the house that I could see were a desk, and a copying and adding machine. The same old chairs were there as well as the same carpet which had been on the floor of the office for many years even before I had occasion to enter the room for the first time. One could see a definite path worn into it.

I remember something that Fr. Stauder once said. I'm not certain of his exact words but the meaning still remains — "School, church, convent, the rectory, unless something more important comes along." What he meant was that as long as the money held out the school, church and convent got taken care of. If there was any money left, the rectory also benefited. Of course, as many people could see, the rectory rarely benefited.

I don't know if that old carpet and the office and sitting room chairs are still there or even the old-fashioned kitchen stove but I saw them all six years ago and it brought back a flood of memories.

Mrs. Edward Wolgas, Rochester

Joseph A. Breig

A Relaxed View Better Than Pills

There is a television commercial which tries to brainwash viewers into reaching for a couple of pills whenever anything happens to upset their routine—when, for instance, the kids get into a pillow fight or splash water and suds all over the bathroom.

As one who has survived the experience of grandfatherhood, I hold that husbands and wives who are young enough to have small children ought to be made of stronger stuff than that. They should disdain such psychological crutches.

Or have we reached the point at which the newer generations are becoming jittery and humorless long before their time?

I recall an evening some years ago, when my wife and I were entertaining a couple of priests from overseas who were on a tour of America.

Our conversation was interrupted by one of our daughters, who came galloping up from the basement, talking frantically to me to hurry down.

(I am opposed to telling little ones that they must never interrupt their elders. Only the other

day, a mother related to me how she had repeatedly shushed her small son, only to discover, finally, that he was trying to tell her that the house was on fire!)

Responding to my daughter's summons, I clattered down the stairs, afraid that someone might have been hurt. I was vastly relieved to find that the trouble was trivial. The youngsters, gaily riding their tricycles and Irish racers, had upset a gallon of paint all over the floor.

I got some of the paint back in the can, mopped up the rest, and returned to our visitors, wearing a cheerful grin.

"What happened?" inquired one of the priests.

I told him.

He gazed at me with a curious expression, compounded of puzzlement, admiration and perhaps even a touch of reverence for (as it must have seemed to him) fatherhood at its finest.

"Well!" he exclaimed, spreading his hands and sinking back in his chair. "It's wonderful that you're able to laugh it off and forget it."

Let's Communicate... On Celibacy

Becket Hall:

What part does the law of celibacy play in the life of a seminarian?

Harry L.

The question of celibacy plays a major role in the decision of a seminarian regarding his vocation. This question cuts deeply into a person's life and nature. The young seminarian must constantly examine the fact that he will abstain from marriage in favor of a celibate life. Such a mode of life is not the norm, yet, this doesn't make the priest abnormal in any way. Christ Himself led a celibate life and we follow in His footsteps.

The Church requires that the seminarian shall acquire a clear understanding of the obligations contained in the law of celibacy before he is ordained. Seminarians are to receive honest guidance in this matter early in their training in order that they will be able to make a clear and free decision.

Those who find that the sacrifice contained in celibacy is too great for them to bear should never regard this as a shame or disgrace. They owe it to the Church, through their honesty and good character, to give up their priestly vocation. Everyone is not called to be a priest, just as everyone is not called to be a doctor, truck driver, or businessman. God has put us on earth in order that we might live the best life we can with our own talents and abilities.

The nature and purpose of celibacy obviously demands that the seminarian acquire a mature attitude toward members of the opposite sex. In former days females were excluded to a great extent from the lives of those preparing for the priesthood. Today, however, many seminarians, like those at Becket

Hall, are educated in secular or mixed schools. The undergraduate seminarian working in a factory or office during vacation meets women frequently at his job. Girls are no longer a novelty. Still though, a candidate for the priesthood must differ in his attitude from that of his friends. The seminarian should foster a mature, friendly, courteous and responsible attitude toward girls. He should realize that his vocation is to all people and, therefore, he must refrain from exclusive relationships.

Becket Hall:

I have noticed in our parish Church a rapid decline in novenas and other public devotions. What is the reason for this? Has liturgical renewal "killed" personal piety?

Leslie W.

In today's society time is one of our scarcest commodities. Once a novena service on a Wednesday evening was practical. Now, however, on a typical Wednesday, the father may be away on business, the mother at a P.T.A. meeting on the other side of town, and the children at a scout meeting with their friends. People no longer take the time for such evening devotions.

We don't really feel, however, that a scarcity of time is the main problem. We believe that the major reason is a re-evaluation of the purpose of novenas and other similar devotions.

In the past too many people considered these devotions to be the main elements of their religion. Today many people may be over reacting against personal prayer because in the past it was too often divorced from everyday living. But, we still see a need for personal prayer in people's lives; prayer which flows spontaneously from the individual as opposed to the

I felt no need to reach for pills. I was simply happy that the accident had happened in the basement with its cement floor, rather than on the living-room carpet.

Reaching for pills strikes me as something to be avoided except in real necessity. Maybe the pre-marriage instructions for young couples should include a talk stressing the point that children being born, it is a bit absurd to go into a tither when they sometimes act accordingly.

There is no sense in reacting to an accident as if it were something accidental and deliberate. I am the first to complain that adults are often idiotically careless, and that many mishaps which they excuse as accidents are really the result of neglect to use the brains that God gave them. Failure to take reasonable precautions (to put it shortly) is unreasonable.

But children live in their own world, a world in which it is highly reasonable to stage pillow fights and to squirt one another with soapy water. Acceptance of that fact will contribute greatly to the harmony and happiness of any family.

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Help

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Church

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