

Go Where the Action Is

(Fifteenth in Series)

THEOLOGY OF THE WORLD

By BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN

This is good advice for the modern religious soul. But in order that action does not become secularism or busy-body-ism, two correctives are necessary:

1. In the world, the religious person will be a Cross-bearer and not a Hand-washer.

2. He will not consider the social as solely relevant and what is spiritual as irrelevant.

Hand-Washers and Cross-Bearers

Those who "go where the action is" are divided into two classes: the Hand-Washers and the Cross-Bearers. The Hand-Washers are rightly shocked at injustices, the rat infested homes of the poor, the strong men of eighteen or nineteen who cannot even read—but they place the blame somewhere else. Like Pilate, they call for water: "So he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd and said: 'I am innocent of this man's blood.'" Guilt is transferred to someone else: blacks are blamed by the whites, whites are blamed by the blacks. "Hierarchy", "suburbia", "establishment", "bishops", "clergy", "rich", all are at the end of a pointed finger. The lust for "Protest" is a perverse psychological way of protesting one's own innocence. Pilate did it with water; others with a placard, and both are done in the name of action.

Pickets, protests, blocking of stores, sit-ins, pouring of blood, preempting schools, burning of office records are done on the grounds that Our Lord drove the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. Our Lord was indeed "the angry young man". He blasted hypocrisy. He inveighed against the establishment of those who "sit in the seat of Moses"; He called a politician a "fox"; He set His face like granite toward Jerusalem when "Man Wanted" posters, or the equivalent, were all over the city; but here is the difference—He died for those against whom He protested.

He bore no hatred against them, but like a tree which bathes with perfume the axe which cuts it down, He begged His Father in the priestly prayer: "Forgive them; they know not what they do." He even associated His Death with love for them. "Greater love than this no man hath..."

In the struggle against racial and social injustice, however, the "new Christs" lay the cross on the backs of others instead of their own; they find scapegoats instead of being victims themselves. The Lord, on the contrary, was "made sin", that is, He put Himself in the sinner's place; but the "new Christs" point fingers of accusation at others, thus making themselves sinless.

What strange spirit dwells with them to make them want to destroy both property and persons? Does not the very passion to destroy have behind it the desire to be destroyed? Is not their hatred of others a projection of their own self-hatred? Is not their severe judgment of others an unconscious escape from the judgment of Christ, whom they know should judge them severely?



"Perverse way of protesting one's own innocence."

The day Christians gave up examination of their own consciences, they began examining every one else's conscience, found them guilty and worthy of death. The true followers of the Cross are sin bearers, not sin imputers; He takes the place of the guilty, but does not find others guilty. Like a judge, after sentencing a criminal, he steps from the bench and takes the punishment.

This brings us to the other class of Christians who, instead of finding others guilty as Hand-Washers, rather become Cross-Bearers. They do not blame others; they are not raising clenched fists at those with whom they are crucified; like the Lord, they are crucified with criminals, "numbered with transgressors", and "friends of sinners". They never analyze social conditions; they just serve, considering themselves as less worthy than all others. Never are they angry against any segment of society or the Church; they never blame little boys for runny noses because they ran half-naked in the snow; they wipe the little noses and use the same rag for their own noses. They never accuse because they are one of the accused, even the least of them all.

Two Cross Bearers

Two examples may be given to those who "Go where the action is" or live in Inner Cities: One in this country, the other in India where there are more ribs to be counted in hungry bodies than anywhere else in the world.

One priest uses his car as an ambulance for the burned bodies of children, the swollen cheeks of beaten wives. His rectory is so open that a victim of mugging will drag himself through the open door for help; he never raised his voice to accuse others of greed or selfishness, and his hands and heart are wide open to all colors, religions and people, just because Christ died for them. He never sees poverty as a "tourist"; he is poverty; he never had to go where the action is. He is already there. He lives there.

On the other side of the world, is another Cross Bearer who often came to my office for help: Sister Teresa of India. A native of Yugoslavia, she founded a community of nuns in 1948. Her habit is a white sari, with blue border and a small cross on the shoulders. To serve Christ in the poor, she demanded four qualities of others: strong

health, a lot of common sense, ability to learn the hard way, and a cheerful disposition. Today she has 350 sisters and 90 centers. Five years and nine months of postulant and novitiate are required. Once in service one rises at 4:40 in the morning and retires at 9:00 p.m. with only 30 minutes rest during the day. No radio, no movies, no television; the simplest of food and one day a week, Thursday, is given to study, prayer and spiritual reading. She has made over 15,000 converts, mostly from the dying she picked out of gutters: "Those we find in the street are Christ in a distressing disguise. Our mission is to help Christ — not destroy the multiplicity of His Presence in the poor."

One can talk hours with Sister Teresa, but never will one hear a word of protest against anyone. Her motto is "let the people eat you up". Eaten up she is, lifting each day tons of shrunken, diseased and emaciated flesh from the trash dumps of the "nightmare cities". No one ever was more involved in action, but it was like the action either of Simon of Cyrene lifting burdens, or of Veronica wiping sweating and leprous bodies. As one man dying said to her and the other sisters: "You are not people here; you do not behave like people. Glory be to you." "No", answered Sister Teresa, "Glory be to you who are suffering with Christ."

Action is not enough; it all depends on what one does when he finds action. It is one thing to swing a sword like Peter against police who came to arrest Our Lord, accusing them of brutality; it is quite another thing to see oneself as the "chief of sinners", as did Paul.

There is a cartoon above the title: "What If" below a road marker: "To the praetorium". On the roadway were two Roman soldiers dragging Christ along the stone roadway, as one sees photos of reluctant revolutionists being dragged by the police. He was shouting to them: "Pigs! What a contrast to 'Father, forgive!' What if Christ took that attitude of hate, accusation and blame, instead of redeeming sinners, even those who arrested Him!

"Go where the action is" will remain the proper directive for modern theology of the world. But once there, instead of shouting "Pigs" and calling for bows to wash our lily-white hands, we will cry out with Paul: "Ask for me, the only thing I can boast about is the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world... I want no more trouble from anybody about this; the marks on my body are those of Jesus" (Gal. 6/14, 17)

The Need of Irrelevance

"Relevance" has become the test of worth in the world today. A student judges his classes by "relevance"; a nun becomes unhappy because teaching children lacks "relevance"; a wife is no longer "relevant" to a husband; a priest fidgets because pastoral life is devoid of "relevance"; contemplation is scorned because it is divorced from action which alone is "relevant". Relevance thus comes to mean the secular, and as such is opposed to what is religious. Relevance leaves room only for one direction: the horizontal. All vertical dimensions are dismissed except the flight to the moon. Theology becomes irrelevant because the way people act is the standard of what is right. Man, and not God, becomes the measure of all things. As Paul VI observed, there is a tendency to "... isolate from the pastoral life the properly religious context of faith and grace. This leads to a preponderance of the study of the religious and moral life under its statistical, sociological and cultural aspects — all of which is outward and incomplete."

Relevance Has A Place

Relevance indeed is necessary. Piety had become too in-grown, parishes too much like exclusive clubs, and the churches too much concerned with their own people. Hope of heaven need not be world-ignoring. Latin America, lepers, armaments, children fighting vultures for rubbish in city dumps, racial hatreds — these are the relevancies of the world.

A greater sensitivity to the presence of God in the secular world is the religious imperative of our times. The complaint against certain types of religiosity which tacks God on to secular activity as a pious addendum, is often justified. God is not to be added to the daily round of life in the manner of that synthetic, looks-like-cream, white, fluffy stuff on top of apple pie. The separation of the Church from the world has been a scandal. But like all swings of the pendulum, the reaction can be equally as extreme at one end as the action was at another. While granting the imperative need of relevance, it must not be forgotten that someone has to be the salt of that world: "If the salt loses its taste, how can it be seasoned again. It is good for neither soil nor manure heap. People throw it out" (Luke 14/35)

The Condition of Effective Relevance

Irrelevance also has a place. Many of the beautiful things in life are irrelevant. Poetry is irrelevant to action and secularity, as is music, archaeology and Homer. And yet how much these add to the happiness of life, and inspire good actions. Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison, was irrelevant to the world when he expressed in his letters dependence on God through hymns, psalms, meditation and all the stuff of the Christian tradition. St. Francis was irrelevant to the building of churches when he climbed on the roof of one and threw it down stone by stone because the church was erected in his name.

Our Lord's life had three tremendous irrelevancies in it: thirty years of silence; the rejection of Satan's pleas to reform the world economically, technologically and politically instead of redemptively; and finally His refusal to win believers by coming down from the Cross.

Peter suffered from economic relevance, when after agreeing to follow Our Lord, he wanted to know: "What do we get out of this?" Quid ergo erit nobis? (Mark 10/28) Professedly non-religious men and women do extraordinary work in the social order; but men and women who regard their spiritual vocation, as irrelevant do not do as well in the same work. Secular men doing secular work are generally more effective than religious people doing secular work for non-religious reasons. A nun proclaiming that she is "witnessing Christ" drinking at a bar is less inspiring than a

(Continued on Page 16)

LETTERS

to the editor

Post Office Site

Editor:

The federal government is now negotiating to build a main Post Office building in the suburbs of Rochester, costing \$30 million.

Our Negro and White brothers who now work for the U.S. Post Office would have a hardship in maintaining transportation to and from work. Presently about 20 per cent of the employees are Negroes in the Post Office.

It is inconceivable that the federal government would even consider moving out of the hub of the city where the low income people are in need of jobs and improving their living standards.

Unless the government can compel our suburban towns to set aside land for low cost housing with the opportunity to be occupied by low income people and furnish subsidies to construct such housing, then the construction of the Post Office should be in the Inner City, where it will eliminate blighted areas and furnish more employment opportunities to the Inner City resident.

—John Campbell, Rochester.

God and the Army

Editor:

A recent newspaper article states that the Army plans to eliminate references to God and religious philosophy in character guidance courses given to soldiers. The article further states that this "new Army policy" was drawn up after a complaint by the American Civil Liberties Union.

I am shocked that such an insidiously un-American policy should even be considered, and equally shocked that it should reach high government levels without public knowledge. This narrow agnosticism is clearly un-American.

George Washington said in his first inaugural address: "... it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect. No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States."

If some people are so twisted and misguided as to deny the relationships between Liberty, Justice, morality, and God's governance of the universe, they should be treated as persons who believe that the earth is flat. They are entitled to their own opinions. However, it is absurd and destructive of the fiber of our national unity and world obligations to erect policy on such abnormal attitudes.

—Robert Kullie, Rochester.

(In a statement on Apr. 7, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird de-

clared that any review of the Army's Character Guidance Program would not prohibit the use of such terms as "God," "Supreme Being," "faith," and "spiritual values." He noted that the program's purpose is "to instill and strengthen patriotism and a sense of moral responsibility," and added that within that framework there would be no prohibition of religious language. — Editor.)

For Sex Education

Editor:

As the mother of two Catholic school children, I wish to go on record as favoring the proposed sex education program. I have always tried to answer my children's questions honestly and as completely as possible, but I welcome any and all support I can get from the school in giving them a healthy and holy interpretation of sexuality in these confused times.

As for the argument that the children will learn "too much, too soon," I wish to point out that in these days of sex oriented advertising, "sex morality" films and questionable TV programs, the children are constantly exposed to sex.

Isn't it better that they receive this information in the Catholic schools under the guidance of our dedicated nuns and lay teachers?

I intend to continue to instruct my children in matters of sex, but I wholeheartedly approve of this program as a welcome supplement to this instruction.

—Mrs. Richard J. Laws, Rochester.

The Pope

World Day of Prayer

Slated April 20

Rome — (NC) — Pope Paul VI has issued a call for the Church to observe the sixth World Day of Prayer for Vocations on April 20, the second Sunday after Easter.

In a letter to bishops throughout the world, the Pope said it was "an anxious, imploring, trusting invitation to the entire Church to implore from the goodness of the Lord the numerous and holy priests required today by the needs of His Mystical Body."

The Pope said he feels he must issue this invitation to prayer for vocations each year because "the vast horizons of apostolic work carried out in the months of the year are 'empty' because of the lack of workers."

Pope Paul said this is a problem for young people, "who may know how to escape from conformity to hedonistic emptiness and to thoughtless and sterile opposition, and offer themselves to Christ Jesus with the unequalled strength of their whole spiritual freshness."

The Pope said it is also "a problem of the entire Christian community which, being alive and active in the parishes and in the various organizations, must fulfill the duty to increase vocations."

He turned then "to families, to Christian spouses," and repeated to them the words of Pope Pius XII: "What will you do, in the event the Divine Master asks you for God's share, in other words for one or the other of your sons or daughters whom He may have designated Himself to give to you, in order to form His priests, His Religious or nuns?"

Pope Paul said "the youth of today is perhaps better adapted and disposed to receive this imponderable call, because young people are thirsting for the more for what is absolute, for generosity and authenticity."

Word for Sunday

There's Joy in Penance

By Father Albert Shannon

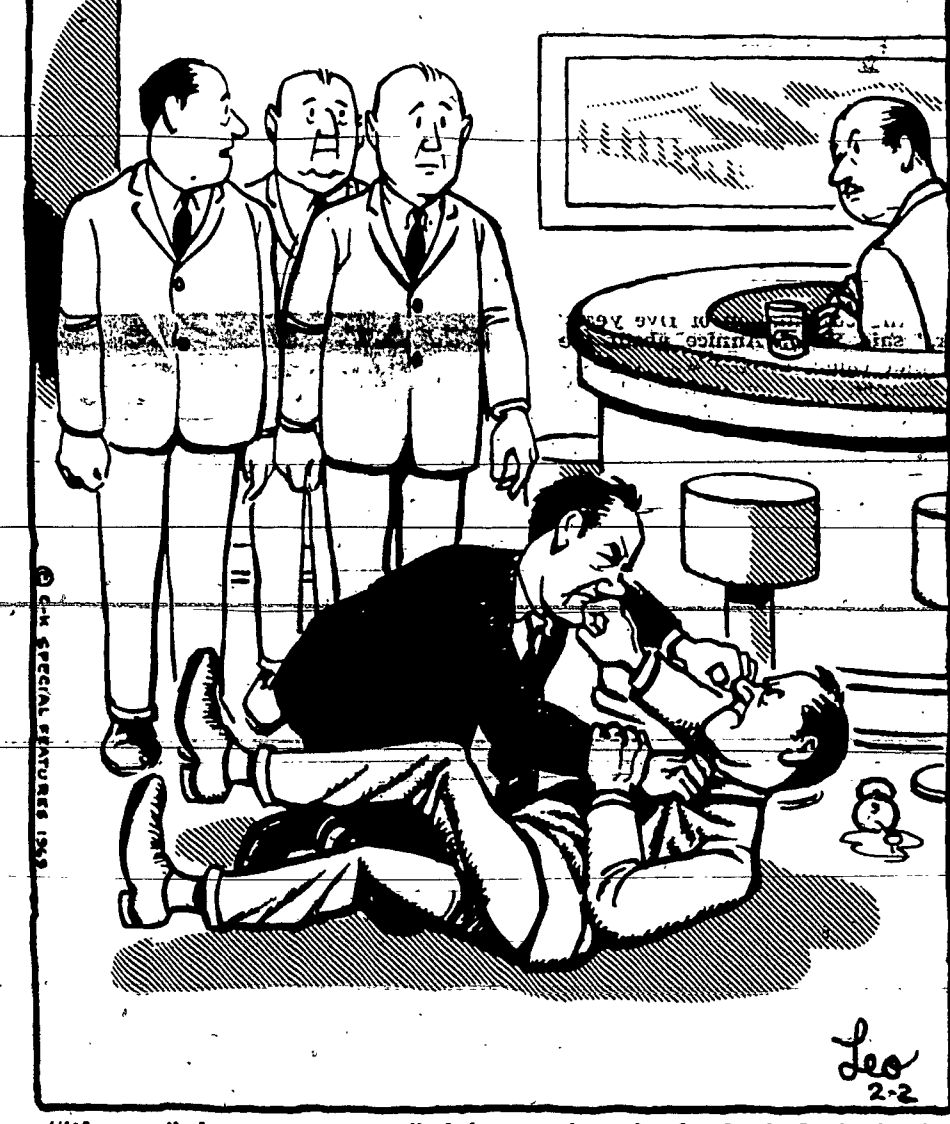
So often we associate the sacrament of Penance with everything-but-joy. The story is told of Al Smith going to confession one Saturday night. There was a long line of penitents when he came in. As he took his place at the end of the line, someone ahead recognized him. Graciously he came to Al and offered the governor his place in line. "No, thank you," said Al, "I'm no more anxious to go in there than you are."

The sacrament of Penance was instituted on Easter, for the sacrament is always meant to bring joy, just as Christ's own resurrection brought joy. Furthermore, great teacher that He was, Christ knew that the apostles had a felt-need for forgiveness on Easter day. For they all had played the coward and one of them had denied Him. They were sad and dejected a lot of men as ever you would want to see — desperately in need of forgiveness.

At this crucial juncture, Christ came to them and said, "Peace be with you." It was not the risen Christ who said this; but a risen Christ scarred with wounds; a risen Christ who had died for sin. Therefore He was one who could say, "Peace be with you" and they would be at peace with God, for His red-lipped scars cried-out, "See, I've paid for your sins, died for you, so when I say, 'Peace be with you,' I can give it to you." And the disciples were filled with joy.

This, then, was the chair, the opportune moment to institute the sacrament—the moment when the apos-

CHURCH HUMOR



"It's a religious argument all right... but they're both Catholics."



COURIER-JOURNAL
NEWSPAPER OF THE PEOPLE OF ROCHESTER

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