

3 Answers to 1 Question

THEOLOGY OF THE WORLD

(Twenty-sixth in Series)

By BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN

The purpose of this article is to clarify the relation of the Church and the world. Once too distant from the world, we have gone to the extreme of being too much immersed in it.

Is dedication to the social, political and economic problems the essence of Christianity? Or must one abstain from such immersion in the world and limit oneself to the spiritual task of being united to the diocese? It is these questions we shall answer, and suggest that both being too far from the world and being too close are wrong.

Actually, the problem resolves itself into the question, "What do you think of Christ?" This same question was asked in a town about twenty-five miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Few Jews lived there, but there were no less than fourteen temples dedicated to Baal, the god of a semi-savagery culture. In this town of Caesarea Philippi, there was a cavern which was supposed to be the home of the great Pan, the god of nature.

In modern language, it was the seat of sexuality, technology and politics, for here there was also Caesar worship. Herod had built a temple to the godhead of Caesar.

It was as if Our Blessed Lord was setting Himself in the background of all world religions and all future civilizations that would degenerate into the erotic, the technological and the totalitarian. Of all the places that he might have chosen to receive an answer to the question he asks, this was indeed the most unlikely.

To the questions He asks He receives three answers:

1. Sociological
2. Ecclesiastical
3. The true answer

The Sociological Answer

His question is: "Who do people say the Son of God is?" (Matt. 16/13)

The first answer is sociological. In a democratic society where every one may vote, what is the Gallup Poll concerning Me? What is the Harris Survey saying about me? What is democracy's judgment? What do the people believe?

"And they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' In a pluralistic society, one receives plural answers. Each had a sociological orientation. Elijah was the man of 'personal commitment' with a deep sense of social righteousness, who confronted kings, generals and evil women in high position with accusations of prejudice and neglect.

Some said that Christ is a Jeremiah, the one who comes to his country's help in time of trouble; one who makes use of "visible aids" and brings home to the people the breakdown of national morale; one who becomes concerned with military draft and the recruitment of armed forces, so much so that the War Cabinet stenciled him by dropping him in a well.

Other segments of those who were balloted, said that Christ was like John the Baptist who was against society presently constituted, laying an ax to the roots of trees, moving among soldiers and tax collectors, and calling "structures" a "brood of vipers".

Others who were less definite said Christ was like one of the prophets. Maybe with the pessimism of Ezekiel, He was One who could see "disaster following disaster" in his country (7/8); or like an Amos predicting an end to the "institution" of the Church: "She is down and will rise no more" (5/1); or like Micah taking over business so that profits will be destroyed and those "who press the grape will never drink from it" (7/15).

The answers of the secular world and sociologists today are no different from those days. They all add up to: **CHRIST IS A MAN FOR THE WORLD.**

Who is Christ? He is, says Cox, the secular man in the secular city; Molmann says He is the One that gives hope, and without any apocalyptic end of the secular world. Block would say that He is the hope of the world in the secular order. Marcuse would say that He is the great revolutionary that must destroy the present order, for no future order could be worse than this.

The Ecclesiastical and Doctrinaire Answer

Our Blessed Lord paid no attention to the sociological survey concerning Him. He had for it nothing but the withering scorn of His silence. When the rule of truth is left to individual men, one finds only contrary and contradictory answers. Our Lord now leaves the democratic for the aristocratic. He turns from the mob to the aristocracy, to His disciples who professedly have been very close to Him, and are therefore "professional Christians"; the Fisherman, the tax collectors and the treasurer of the apostolic band, Judas, who came from the more elite part of the country. Turning to His chosen group, He says: "But you, who do you say that I am?"

There was no answer. Ever since Our Lord had announced Himself as the Bread of Life, Judas had grave doubts about His worldly insights, and decided that he must follow his own individual conscience; Thoma was so pessimistic and so concerned with death, that he could rarely see straight and answer straight questions; Nathaniel could not get over the fact that he had come from "the wrong side of the tracks", that insignificant village of Nazareth; Phillip was confused about his relations to his Heavenly Father; Andrew, the public relations man, was much more interested in making good contacts, particularly when there was need of food for the hungry.

There was no answer by the spiritual elite. Then one man steps out from the crowd without the consent of the others. It was Simon Peter who spoke up under Divine inspiration: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16/16). Our Lord immediately told him that He did not know this of himself: "Simon, Son of John, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and

blood that revealed this to you, but My Father Who is in heaven". Then the Lord gave to him the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven and told him that he was to be the Rock upon which He would build His Church.

The secular world did not know who Christ was; they identified Him with the secular order and social justice. The ecclesiastical, doctrinal, orthodox answer which was given was the right one: Christ is the Son of the Living God. The theologians who recite the creed are right; the pious who study their catechism know that Christ is both God and man. But notice that in contrast to the sociological approach, there is nothing said about Christ's relationship to mankind in the world. Divinity is terminal. Faith rests in Christ; it is doctrinal, but not social minded, or concerned with the hunger and the thirst of men, or their slums and their inner cities.

The Two Extremes

Once again, one finds the extreme of the secular without the Divine, and the Divine without the secular; worldliness without God, and God without the world. For a few centuries the Church drew Christ to its bosom in a kind of an exclusive love of His Divinity; then came the reaction when the mad rush to the world left the sanctuary of Divinity unvisited. The sociological Christ is today the more popular, in the sense that religion loves the inner city without the Heavenly City. The ecclesiastical and orthodox answer, with its stress on the Heavenly City to the neglect of the secular city, is on the defensive.

The True Answer

But both extremes are wrong: the democratic Christ is too human; the ecclesiastical Christ is too Divine. This brings us to the most neglected aspect of Christian theology and one which holds the key to the rehabilitation of Christians and the renovation of the Church.

It is Christ Himself Who gives the answer both to the Gallup Poll Christian and to the prayer book Christian, for immediately following the words to Peter about keys, Our Blessed Lord announces His Passion and His Death: "Jesus began to make it clear to His disciples that He was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day" (Matt. 16/21). He was telling them that the only way to reconcile the secular and the Divine, the inner city and the Heavenly City, was by the way of the Cross.

He would suffer from both extremes. He would suffer from the liberal Sadducees who would refuse to believe immortality; He would suffer from the orthodox scribes and pharisees who ignored the common people.

He was saying: "You do not understand Me, I am the sheep Yaweh: 'I am the Suffering Servant of God'." In the Old Testament was often given to the nation as a whole (Isaiah 41/8-10) as a prelude to a suffering Church in the New Testament. Israel was created and molded and equipped for no other reason than that there might come out of it Jesus The Servant.

He had come not to be a teacher, for the world already had more knowledge than it ever lived up to; but He had come to be a Redeemer and the Savior. A few years ago, there was a Life of Christ by this author, the point of which was to show that everyone else that came into this world came into it to live; Our Lord came into it to die. Death was the goal of His life, the gold that He was seeking. He had come primarily to save men from their sins. He thought of His Life and his Death in terms of sacrifice and as a ransom for many (Mark 10/45). The Cross alone would restore the lost relationship between man and God. The Suffering Servant is the supreme picture of One Who suffered and died, obedient to the Will of God and for the sake of men.

The Suffering Servant

Neither the worldly nor the unworlily understood Him, neither did the secular nor the religious. Even those who stood around Peter and heard him proclaim the Divinity, did not get the full picture. Should they not have known when they saw Him baptized in the Jordan, and "saw the heavens open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on Him"? A voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; My favor rests on you." This was the beginning of the long passage in the forty-second chapter of Isaiah where the Suffering Servant is described not only as "One Who will not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame, but One Who will say: 'I have redeemed you . . . I am your Savior'."

They should have known it from their history. When Abraham led his son up the mountain to be sacrificed — a symbol of God the Father offering His Son, Isaac gasped: "Where is the lamb of sacrifice?" That question rang down through the centuries. Now as John the Baptist was preaching, every Jewish family was leading its lamb up that long road from the Jordan to Jerusalem. Looking out over the lambs, John the Baptist saw the figure of Christ, and answered the question: "There is the lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1/29).

They should have known it when even the mother of James and John, or perhaps even both of them in company with their mother, sought ecclesiastical preferment, and wanted the honor of being associated with Christ as they asked for high places in His kingdom. His answer to them was: "Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized?" (Mark 10/38). By the "cup" was meant the experience allotted to men by God, for Isaiah describes the disaster coming upon the people of Jerusalem as people having drunk "at the hand of the Lord the cup of the Lord" (Isaiah 51/17).

Baptism meant being submerged in the way that a bereaved person is submerged in sorrow and tears. The Lord was asking them if they could go through the terrible experience that He had to go through. Would they go on loving the world, if the love of that world cost them a crucifixion? Would they be still so much concerned with His Divinity, if the Divinity also involved a humanity that had to be crucified?

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New Look at Some Old Saints

Catholic Press Features

If the life of St. Polycarp really does mean something to you, you'll go out right now and buy some more insurance.

And if St. Florentina's life means anything at all to you, you will be sure to save any nice letters that people write to you.

The same with Blessed Pellegrino, St. Marcius the Younger, St. Eulalia of Merida, St. Philemon the Flutist, St. Maximus of Turin and more notable saints such as St. George, St. Augustine and St. John of the Cross — they all have something practical to teach today's Christian, and if more people would learn how to see the secular rather than plous lessons to be learned from the lives of the saints, there would be less worry about downgrading of favorite saints.

So claims the Rev. Charles Merrill Smith, a Methodist minister who became famous for his comic "How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious" and who has now written a very timely book titled "When the Saints Go Marching Out," which is also very satirical.

The Rev. Mr. Smith claims that "though staunchly Protestant, the author has been long an admirer and student of the saints, and has for several years been depressed over their neglect. Obviously, a reason for this shameful shelving of the saints is wanting, and one now has emerged."

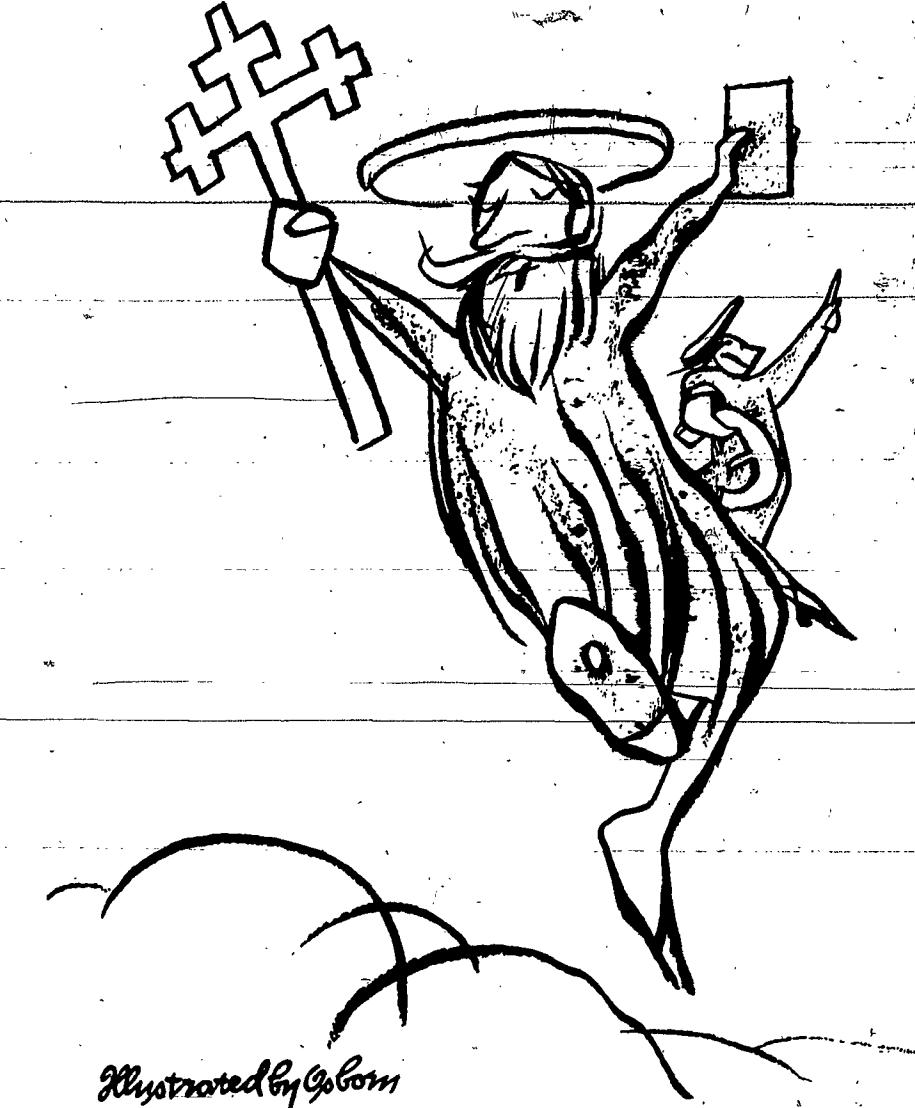
The reason is, he says, that "secular man lives by secular values, quite different than the virtues of the saints which moved an earlier time to emulation," so the only way to retain and increase the popularity of the saints is to show that there are "unmined veins of secular wisdom" in the lives of the saints.

For instance, he argues, take the life of a saint who gave up a life of sin and heresy to become one of the greatest doctors of the Church: St. Augustine. Today's secular man is not too impressed with the lessons about purity and faith that St. Augustine's life teaches, the Rev. Mr. Smith suggests. Anxious about getting ahead in the business world, today's secular man would be more impressed with St. Augustine if the lesson that saint has to offer is:

"It's O.K. to switch from being a Christian to a rove to a Manichean to a skeptic to a Neo-Platonist so long as you eventually settle on something and stick with it."

St. Polycarp, in Charles Merrill Smith's "Lives of the Saints," lived 86 years, and when he was condemned to be burned alive he didn't mind because he had divine assurance that the flames would not harm him. Sure enough, they didn't, and Macarius' life teaches, the Rev. Mr. Smith suggests. Anxious about getting ahead in the business world, today's secular man would be more impressed with St. Augustine if the lesson that saint has to offer is:

"Save your old letters. You never can tell when one of them might come in handy."



An illustration by Robert Osborn from "When the Saints Go Marching Out."

Blessed John Jones was a Welshman who went to college in Rome, became a priest there and when he came back to Wales, the people there accused him of "being ordained abroad" and hanged him. The lesson is: "A European education is a terrific status symbol, but the neighbors may think you are a snob."

St. Nicholas of Flue had a wife and 10 children, and one day he went out to a hermitage and stayed for 19 years. The lesson: "If you have a houseful of noisy kids, a wife should expect that her husband sometimes may need to get away for a little vacation."

Finally, St. Austregius: "All we know of the life of St. Austregius is that one time his friends were insisting that he ought to be married and he replied, 'If I found a good wife I would be too afraid of losing her; and if you want me to have a bad one, I would rather not.'"

The lesson: "From this fragmentary record of the life of St. Austregius, we can never forget that while there are very few good arguments in favor of the celibate life, there are none."

Word for Sunday

Peter the Bedrock of the Church

By Father Albert Sharpen

Sunday is the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul.

The Catholic Church did not appear on the stage of history all of a sudden, with Christ. Centuries before, God the Father wove man. He saw fit to do this through a congregation (Qahal). He chose a people. To a people, not to a person. He entrusted His revelation. This people — and no other nation — had the truth. Their mission was to bring this truth to the rest of the world: "to be a light of revelation to the Gentiles."

To this end God made this assembly infallible and indefectible. Is it not unique that Israel has a post-exile history? No other nation in Canaan had. Then, too, when she strayed away from the truth, God raised up mouthpieces — the prophets — who saved Israel's theology from being mythology.

But Israel failed in her mission; she did not become a light to the Gentiles; instead she turned upon the true Light of the World, God's Son. He had sought to put the new wine of His Gospel into the old wineskins of Jewish officialdom. But he was spurned. So He chose new wineskins — untutored and unlettered fishermen. He chose twelve, for the tribes of Israel supplanted were twelve.

To enable this new Israel to be a light of revelation to the Gentile, He promised her both the indefectibility and the infallibility of the old Israel. So He founded her on a rock (Peter means rock): "Upon this rock I shall build my Church and hell's gates — error from within and persecution from without — shall not prevail against her."

Then on the night before He died, calling Peter "Simon," as Christ always did in moments of profound intimacy, He whispered, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have you . . . but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail . . . and do thou strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22: 31-32).

The early Church understood this in only one way; namely, that Christ had conferred a primacy upon Peter above all his brothers. Thus the Gospels always name Peter first in the lists of the Twelve. Peter always acts as their spokesman; it is Peter he asks about hard sayings (Mt. 15:15), about forgiveness (Mt. 18:23), about rewards (Mt. 19:27), about the fig tree (Mk. 11:21), and so on and on.

But it in the Acts of the Apostles that the Church's realization of the primacy of Peter bursts forth in uncloaked clarity.

Peter is not the head of the Church because Luke pictures him as such; but Peter is pictured as such because he is in fact the head of the Church. Consider who it was who made the first move to replace Judas, who it was who spoke for the Church on Pentecost. It was Peter. It was always Peter who took the initiative, it

CHURCH HUMOR



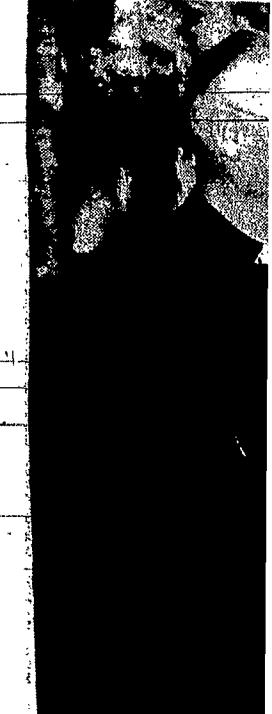
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