



What really matters? A vast space-and-time-world encompasses us. What do we look forward to in this world? What are worthy goals for our lives? What do we really want? (NC Photo by John Sullivan)

## Our Faith in the Bible

By FATHER WALTER A. ABBOTT, S.J.

We have seen that the Old Testament presents God as revealing himself to the Hebrew people. Those Hebrew scriptures themselves often say that they are inspired — in many sections of the books of the prophets, for example, they assert that they have God himself as their author.

The apostles Peter and Paul are quoted in the New Testament as holding that same belief about the Hebrew scriptures. In a few places they are also quoted as showing that same belief about parts of the Greek books which we call the New Testament.

In Paul's first Letter to Timothy (5:18) we read, "For the Scripture says, 'do not tie up the mouth of the ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'the worker deserves his wages.'" Most of you are probably more familiar with that second saying in older English, "the laborer is worthy of his hire."

In that first quotation Paul refers to a verse in the Book of Deuteronomy (25:4), which we know as the fifth book of the Old Testament. The second is a saying which we find attributed to Jesus in Luke's Gospel (10:7).

Peter refers to "our dear brother Paul" as "using the wisdom God gave him" in his letters. Peter, therefore, regarded Paul's letters as part of the inspired scriptures, that is, having God as the principal author.

The early Christian writers after the biblical period, whom we call the Fathers of the Church, referred to the Scriptures as "dictated by the Holy Spirit." They favored the idea that the human authors of the Scriptures were used by God as "instruments." They regarded the Scriptures as completed

### Scripture in Life Of Church Today

by the time the Apostle St. John died.

Eventually, ecumenical councils of the Church solemnly defined "that one and the same God is the author of both Old and New Testaments." You will find this in the Documents of Vatican II, reproducing what was taught by the Councils of Trent and Florence.

This official teaching of the Church, that God is the author of all the parts of old and New Testaments, has, I know, troubled many a Catholic who has looked into some parts of the Old Testament and wondered how God could ever have inspired them (for example, certain verses in the Psalms, which call down dreadful curses on one's enemies). We will come back to that part of the problem.

What matters right now is the fact that the teaching authority of the Church has defined that God is the author of the Scriptures. There is, therefore, a complex act of faith here for us, in the idea that God is the author of the sacred books, in the Scriptures saying so and in the Church saying so.

It is an interesting fact that the ecumenical councils of Florence and Trent and Vatican I kept that terminology of the early Fathers about "dictation" of the Holy Spirit. They referred to "the Holy Ghost dictating," the "dictation of the Holy Spirit" and "dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth or by the Holy Ghost."

In the century since the First Vatican Council, a great deal of thinking and writing has been done about the human authors of the Scriptures and their role in the divine inspiration of the

books. On certain occasions, in encyclical letters, the popes have taken up the topic.

In 1893, Pope Leo XIII wrote, "By supernatural power God so moved and impelled the human authors to write, and was so present to them, that the things which he ordered, and those only, they first rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth" (encyclical entitled "Providentissimus Deus").

This statement of Pope Leo XIII is often called the best definition of biblical inspiration that we have. It certainly marked an advance in thinking over the terminology of "dictation" used in the Councils of Trent and Vatican I.

The statement of the encyclical uses the word "supernatural." The word refers to something which we do not have from nature or by right — it is "above" nature or "above" what we naturally have a right to. It refers to one of the basic points made by theologians who try to explain any article of faith, and to explain faith itself, namely, that faith is a gift from God, the belief in God's authorship of the Scriptures, therefore, and in the Church's right to declare something about the matter is seen as a gift from God to each believer.

Making reference to the definition of inspiration written by Pope Leo XIII, the Second Vatican Council makes the statement that is now the best one we have about biblical inspiration: "In composing the sacred books, God chose men, and while employed by him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which he wanted." (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 11).

# KNOW YOUR FAITH

## Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD MCBRIEN

**Q.** Why should there be so much confusion and dissension in the Church today? How can anyone, and especially a theologian, put his own ideas higher than Revelation?

**A.** What is at issue today is not the power and authority of God's Word but rather its meaning and implications.

No one, including the Pope and the bishops, has direct, immediate contact with divine revelation. Not even Sacred Scripture can be called the pure, unalloyed Word of God.

St. John, St. Paul, St. Luke, the various authors of the other books of the Bible were all attempting to express in human language what they and their communities perceived to be the presence of God in their lives and in their experience. Thus, the Bible itself is an interpretation of the Word of God.

It is a means of revelation, but it is not revelation in itself, apart from faith.

The same reasoning would apply to the doctrines of the Church. These are not the direct revelation of God. The Pope and bishops were struggling to think other people's thoughts in conjunction with their own.

When they sat down to construct a particular formulation of faith, they had to consult the testimony of Sacred Scripture, the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, those of the great theologians of the past, the lessons of history, the work of contemporary scholars, their own pastoral experience, and so forth.

The Holy Spirit did not speak to them directly while they were hidden away in some special room.

Indeed, except in the case of one who has had a direct experience of God (and this would be rather difficult to check), every expression of revelation is always a work of theology. That is, it is always a work of human interpretation and of human language.

And this applies, as I said earlier, to the Bible itself and to Church doctrines.

There is tension in the Catholic Church today because many serious and sincere Catholics, including theologians, priests, and Religious, no longer assume that every previous formulation of faith is on par with revelation itself.

And yet that is so often the way in which these formulations were originally proposed. To question an explanation of faith offered by theologians endorsed by Church authorities was tantamount to questioning the faith itself.

We have come to realize today, however, that every verbal expression of faith is limited by so many factors: historical circumstances, geographical setting, educational background, cultural perspective, information at hand, conscious and unconscious prejudices, unresolved psychological conflicts, intellectual deficiencies, and so forth.

This does not mean that we are left in the same position as an agnostic. As Catholics, for example, we believe that the written testimony of Sacred Scripture, the official doctrines of the Church, the contemporary witness of the general membership of the Church and of its leaders, are of immeasurable importance in helping us to make up our minds about the meaning of the Gospel and about the implications of our Christian faith for our life in this world.



Togetherness is sharing each other's strengths and weaknesses. (NC Photo by Robert Smith.)