

The Word of God Comes in Words of Men

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT

Scripture in Life Of Church Today

If God is the author of all the books of the Bible, why do they vary so much in style and literary quality? This is a standard question for every student of the Bible. If he has to take an examination about the Bible, he will encounter it sooner or later. If he is studying by himself, he will certainly raise the question himself.

We have begun to see the answer in the statement of the Second Vatican Council which mentioned God choosing men "who made use of their powers and abilities" and who therefore acted "as true authors" when they wrote the things God wanted them to write for the collection of books which we call the Bible.

Go back with me for a few moments to Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter of 1943, "Divino Afflante Spiritu," which surprised some people by its clear assertion that "deeper and more accurate interpretation of Sacred Scripture was possible in our times." In fact, the Pope added, such better interpretation was to be expected, because "not a few things, especially in matters pertaining to history," were "scarcely at all or not fully" explained by the commentators of past ages, who "lacked almost all the information which was needed for their clearer exposition."

The next sentence of that encyclical letter said in effect that for hundreds of years, the five centuries of the Church's history which are called the Patristic era, or the period of the Fa-

thers of the Church, the first chapters of Genesis were not properly understood. One can legitimately infer that those chapters were not properly understood until our times, when one adds still another of Pope Pius XII's sentences.

As you read the sentences, ask yourself if the inference I have mentioned is justified: "How difficult for the Fathers themselves, and indeed well-nigh unintelligible were certain passages, is shown, among other things, by the oft-repeated efforts of many of them to explain the first chapters of Genesis . . . quite wrongly therefore do some pretend, not rightly understanding the conditions of biblical study, that nothing remains to be added by the Catholic exegete of our time to what Christian antiquity has produced, since, on the contrary, these our times have brought to light so many things, which call for a fresh investigation and a new examination, and which stimulate not a little the practical zeal of the present-day interpreter."

Let me add two more points made in Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter, and you will see another reason why I like it so much, namely that it led directly to one of the most important declarations of the Second Vatican Council.

First, "there is no one in-

deed but knows that the supreme rule of interpretation is to discover and define what the writer intended to express." The Pope indicated that this point has its roots far back in the patristic era — he quotes one of the Fathers of the Church, St. Athanasius, "here, as indeed is expedient in all other passages of Sacred Scripture, it should be noted on what occasion the apostle spoke—we should carefully and faithfully observe to whom and why he wrote, lest, being ignorant of these points, or confounding one with another, we miss the real meaning of the author."

Though the Fathers of the Church could not always do it, as we have seen, this is what they wanted to do. If Pope Pius XII was right, modern biblical scholars are better able to do it. The point is that the word of God comes in the words of men, and we have to be attentive to all the nuances in the words of men to know that word of God.

The second point I want to add is that Pope Pius XII stressed the interpreter of the Scriptures must "with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak, the authors of that ancient period would be likely to use, and in fact did use."

The Pope added, "No one who has a correct idea of biblical inspiration will be surprised to find, even in the sacred writers, as in other ancient authors, certain fixed ways of expounding and narrating, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues,

so-called approximations, and certain hyperbolic modes of expression, nay, at times even paradoxical, which help to impress the ideas more deeply on the mind."

As I think back on the 20 years between the appearance of Pius XII's encyclical letter and the discussions in the Second Vatican Council on this topic, it seems to me that in the Catholic Church there was a widespread attitude which could fairly be summed up this way, "I don't care what you do about literary forms in the Old Testament, but just don't try it in the New Testament."

Many reacted to the idea that some of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels could be explained as examples of typical Semitic exaggeration, which a teacher of those days would deliberately and calmly use in order to shake up his

pupils, or the people, to drive a point home.

No doubt there still are some priests and people who feel that way. I would ask them to look with me now at a statement of Vatican II, speaking about the scriptures in general, both Old and New Testaments, before making special statements about each testament:

"Those who seek out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for 'literary forms.' For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Doing Your Thing

Worship and The World

Someone occasionally suggests that all present for Mass join in reciting with the celebrant the eucharistic prayer. It seems on face value to make good sense. What better way to involve a congregation than to have everyone speak in unison with the priest these most significant words?

A deeper consideration of the practice, however, casts serious doubts about its soundness. The procedure apparently rests on the assumption that people best and only participate when they speak or sing. It forgets the natural rhythm at Mass of now singing, now watching, now speaking, now listening, now standing, now kneeling. I have witnessed for example intense participation, great concentration and real communication through absolute silence during the period of thanksgiving after Communion.

This seemingly desirable method of community involvement also overlooks the distinction of roles presupposed in public prayer. Everyone has his own thing to do. The priest performs a function, so does the congregation; the choir fulfills its task, the reader his; the ushers assume certain responsibilities, the servers discharge other ones.

Article 58 of the General Instruction establishes this as a fundamental principle: "Everyone in the eucharistic assembly has the right and duty to take his own part according to the diversity of orders and functions. Whether minister or layman, everyone should do that and only that which belongs to him, so that in the liturgy the Church may be seen as composed of various orders and ministries."

Two recent paperback publications ("The New Mass" by Rev. A. M. Rouget, O.P., Catholic Book Publishing Co. of New York, \$2.95; "The New Order of Mass" edited by Rev. J. Patino, The Liturgical Press of Collegeville, Minnesota, \$1.85) explain in greater detail the historical and theological basis for that statement and for other directives of the General Instruction. The former is more popularly written and the latter more thorough in content.

The priest, then, is the one who really should proclaim the so-called canon. "Among the parts assigned to the priest, the eucharistic prayer has precedence; it is the high point of the celebration." (Article 10).

But the congregation needs to respond. "All should listen to the eucharistic prayer in silent reverence and share in it by making the acclamations." (Article 55).

Since these acclamations (the Holy, Holy, Holy, the four responses after "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith," the "Amen" before the Our Father) belong to the congregation, not to choir or to celebrant, a few practical observations may be in order.

- For the choir alone to sing the Sanctus represents bad liturgy; for a choir alone, however talented, to prolong this acclamation over five or ten minutes (done, unfortunately, at a national celebration some months ago) is even worse.

- All three of these acclamations ideally should be sung to accentuate their importance and better express their meaning.

- Each of the acclamations following the words of institution should be used. I would estimate that in 90% of the Masses this particular writer has celebrated over the past 15 months the congregation recited only "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." St. Michael's Church in Findlay, Ohio, solved quite easily the problem of how to teach parishioners different versions and announce the proper one for a given Sunday. A large, bright banner with the designated acclamation is placed in the sanctuary and changed weekly or monthly. It was a relatively easy step, once the words had been learned, to move on and sing these according to simple melodies.

The Church's Role in Faith

By FR. JOHN T. BYRNE

Faith is an experience within the community of believers which is the Church. The family, the parish and sometimes even the civil community hand the faith down to succeeding generations. They create the climate for belief and frequently provide safeguards for Faith which protect it from undue attacks.

The faith as creed and believing as commitment are certainly related to part of a broader context of cultural paraphernalia which taken together form a portion of the security system each individual must have to satisfy his need for belonging.

There certainly is the possibility that the Church can pass on the faith in a much too naive manner. It can claim to have answers that it really doesn't have (in science and other secular matters.) It can surround its members with too many safeguards which only weaken them instead of strengthening them.

But on the other hand we can become too critical of the cultural context of faith. It is possible to be almost masochistic in beating one's breast and tearing apart the fabric of one's cultural background whether it be the Irish Catholic syndrome or the German or the Italian one. A great deal of this is going on as a side effect of the renewal in the Church.

Everything about the past is being criticized and faith is being shaken as a result. No doubt some criticism is valid, but the really naive thing would be to think that what we have come up with as "new thinking" is really that much better. The same human limitations are operating in the "new" theology, the "new" liturgy and certainly in the "new" morality.

The question is: Is it possible for the human context to be perfect and the answer is No. Another question is: Is it possible for the Act of Faith to take place outside a human context and of course the answer is also No.

Therefore we should not be

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him.

Viktor Frankl



surprised if we can see continued need to refine and purify faith by improving the human context. But the further question is whether we are really improving it. Today we hear a great deal about "the world come of age." In many areas this is more of an illusion than anything else. Even in areas where there has been undoubted progress such as science, human limitations loom up.

The idea of limitless progress resulting in an earthly paradise is of the 19th century. Twentieth century man is too much aware of his limitations to perpetuate that myth.

Faith in the context of the church is a distinctly human and limited thing. It leaves much to be desired, but how long will it take us to see that this is the way God has chosen to deal with us? The most un-

realistic criticism of the Church is that it is too human and manifests too many human weaknesses.

Learning to accept our own human limitations and those of the people we must deal with is one of the necessary developmental tasks for psychological growth. Unfortunately some never achieve it.

The young lover tends to idolize his sweetheart at first. It is only after a few months of marriage that he is stunned by her human faults and weaknesses. Then he can either learn to adjust to the fact that he has married someone slightly less than the ideal girl (as he is less than the ideal husband), or he can become bitter and react by demonizing her—attributing to her every possible fault and seeing her as the worst possible wife.