

FAITH AND ACTION

By DR. MONIKA HELLWIG

Many people do not like it when priests preach from the pulpit about peace in Vietnam, or about race and integration, or about poverty and social welfare. Priests who do preach about these things are frequently told they should be content with preaching the Christian religion rather than meddling in political and social matters.

Those who are supposed to be the experts in religion insist that it is concerned with the way we run our society as well as the way we live our private lives. Yet their congregations so frequently maintain that a faith commitment has to do with what you believe about God and the next world and has little to do with the way we organize this world.

In Catholic circles there is one important public issue on which people are prepared to hear sermons preached and that is the topic of communism.

Marx openly and clearly condemned religion; people know this, so they expect to hear sermons against Marxism and communism. Often they do not know why Marx condemned religion. He condemned it because he said it was "the opium of the people," that it kept them preoccupied with beliefs about another world beyond death so that they did not have to solve the big social and economic problems of this world.

As he saw the effect of religion in his time, he felt

that it simply kept the poor poor and the rich complacent about it by telling everyone that there might be all kinds of social injustice but it was God's will so they must all accept it.

This accusation did not stop in the 19th Century; it is being made constantly today. It has caused many people to ask the question as to what social injustice and war and poverty have to do with what we believe.

It has made scholars and other serious Christians go back to the gospels and other writings of the earliest Christians to try to understand how the message of salvation relates to the affairs of the world.

And the most important question they had to ask was whether the gospel exhorts them to work to change things according to a new vision of how things should be, or whether it exhorts them to accept everything just as it is, and pray and wait for Jesus to come again at the end of time and in an instant make a new heaven and a new earth.

In the gospels, Jesus speaks a good deal of the kingdom that is to come but in some way is already there, the kingdom that is the reign of God, the kingdom that is to set God's faithful people free from oppression and injustice and frustration.

He said, "Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought . . . but my kingdom is not of this kind" (Jo. 18.36).

Evidently, that interpretation is not easy because the apostles themselves had difficulty in understanding what it was he promised and demanded.

After the resurrection they asked, "Lord, has the time come? Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1.6). Jesus answers them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8).

In interpreting this task of witnessing, some of them thought it meant telling everyone the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, asking people to believe it and be baptized, and then waiting for the kingdom.

But as time passed they began to have a clearer understanding and the apostles waged a ceaseless campaign to tell them that the witness was the way of life of the community of followers of Jesus. Among them there should be no rich and poor, privileged and unprivileged; their community life together was to be the living representation of the kingdom.

In the earliest times the Christians did not feel responsible for society as a whole, because they were a small and persecuted group with no political power. But within their own circles they were busy constructing a different kind of society based on justice and respect for the poorest.

Their witness was indeed



Non-violent peacemaker. His witness is indeed one of turning the world upside down in terms of social justice, writes Monika Hellwig. Because true non-violence is so effective, she continues, it always attracts a good deal of hostility, as in the case of Jesus himself. (NC Photo, by C. McGue)

one to turn the world upside down in terms of social justice, not by fighting but by non-violence. Because true non-violence is so effective, it always attracts a good deal of hostility as in the case of Jesus himself.

Today Christians are the majority in our society, so they have the same witness responsibility for the whole society. If they fulfilled it, Marx could be buried in peace.

**KNOW
YOUR
FAITH**



The Words of God In Human Language

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT

We have seen what Scripture itself has to say about the dual authorship of the sacred books, what Fathers and Doctors of the Church, Popes and Ecumenical Councils have said on the subject.

Do you now feel more confident that you can call Scripture "the word of God in words of men"? Do you think you now understand divine inspiration of the Scriptures? Do you think at least that we know a great deal about it?

We are dealing with a mystery here, and it is a very profound mystery. The fact that the Bible is the word of God is something we cannot fully explain. It is something in which we make an act of faith, precisely because, although we have reasons for making that act of faith, we really cannot explain everything in that act of faith.

I would like to give you an idea which runs through the whole history of Christian commentaries on the Scriptures. It is the idea that the truth and holiness of God always remains intact, pure, and undiminished in the Scriptures (a fact which is based on the very nature of God's truth and holiness).

But at the same time there is what can be called a "condescension" of God's wisdom which we can see in the Scriptures, "that we may learn the gentle kindness of God, which words cannot express, and how far He has gone in adapting His language with thoughtful concern for our weak human nature."

The words I have quoted come from one of St. John Chrysostom's homilies on the book

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of Genesis. The words, which the patriarch of Constantinople, Father and Doctor of the universal church, wrote over 1,500 years ago, were quoted by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, in the document called "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation."

The Fathers of Vatican II immediately added a sentence which summarizes the point to which these words of St. John Chrysostom lead: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as of old the Word of the Eternal Father, when He took to Himself the weak flesh of humanity, became like other men."

You see, therefore, that the divine authorship of the Scriptures, through and with and in men, is as much of a mystery as the action of God through and with and in the humanity of Christ, which we call the Incarnation.

We do not really know another human person unless he or she speaks and tells us something. And "something" will not do — we really have to be told many things. We can know only so much from our observations of another's motions, gestures and activities. If there is some kind of communication, we feel we really begin to get knowledge about the other person. The facts learned in this way are even dignified with the term "revelation" if the element of love has entered in. Then everything in the experi-

ence of communication is special, appreciated and cherished.

We know God to a certain extent from our observations of what can be called His motions, gestures and activities — the facts of creation, nature and history, especially when you add the elements of divine providence, whether you do that from one source of knowledge or another — but we really know God from what He has spoken and told us and we have the record of it in the Scriptures.

This plan of revelation, the Second Vatican Council teaches, is realized by the works of God in the history of salvation and by the words of the sacred Scriptures, which "proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them."

By this revelation, "the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation."

Now, if all this is true, we are faced with the fact that what Scripture reveals is God Himself — divine revelation is a series of personal acts and utterances — through the Scriptures we are put in contact with God Himself. There is a presence of God in the Scriptures, therefore, which is something like the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

We may not be able to explain very well how God united Himself to human flesh in Christ, to the work of human hands in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and to human words in the Scriptures but the result of these actions by God is that we know a great deal about Him.