



The word of God speaks to men through contemporary situations. The desires, woes, cares and fears of people today vary so greatly that the world may seem like a maze of confusion. (NC Photo by Bob Smith).

The Response of Faith To the Revealing God

By FR. WALTER M.
ABBOTT, S.J.

The God who reveals Himself through the words of men in the Scriptures is a living person. He speaks to each human person who encounters Him in the Scriptures. Each of us is therefore called to make a response.

From the time of Jesus right up to our own day, a Christian who would try to explain that response would use the term "faith." Unfortunately, the theological battles of the Reformation set most Catholic textbook writers for the next 400 years on a track that stressed faith as an intellectual act and a free assent.

Fortunately, the progress of the ecumenical dialogue has brought the evidence of the Scriptures back into the primary focus for us.

For a very good example of what is now done in our teaching about faith, look at the article "Faith" in the New Catholic Encyclopedia. The rich content of the act of faith throughout Old and New Testaments is presented first. When one finishes reading it, he may very likely feel that he doesn't need anything more.

The article continues with a presentation of theological and philosophical insights from the subsequent history of Christianity, and of course it includes many worthwhile things. But I understand how one could feel, after seeing all that Scripture says about faith, that one really does not need more.

It is clear from all the scriptural evidence that faith includes firmness, constancy, trust, hope and confidence on the part of the one who makes the act of faith. Of course my act of faith is an assent of the mind, and I make it freely, but it also includes confidence in my heart, and a spirit of obedience in my will — all this about God and His promises.

From the passage of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, from the Psalms, from the Gospels and the Epistles of the New Testament we learn that one who has faith trusts and relies, feels secure, hopes in, waits with confidence for, and believes all this about God and His promises.

Scripture in Life Of Church Today

In other words, by probing the Scriptures we recover the idea of revelation as encounter. When we realize that the God revealing Himself in the Scriptures is the Creator of the world, who guides men toward their salvation, and asks us for our service in a spirit of love, we realize we are expected to respond by giving ourselves to the revealing God in complete reliance and trust, because He has asked it, and this giving of ourselves extends to the whole conduct of our life.

Look for a moment at the Book of Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 8-11, a passage about the fruitfulness of God's word. God is presented there as insisting, "so shall My word be that which goes forth from My mouth — it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper the thing for which I sent it" (RSV).

In the encounter with the revealing God through faith it is always God who takes the initiative. During the past 400 years, many Catholic scholars have produced great volumes devoted entirely to the subject of God's grace.

Much of what they have tried to explain is contained quite simply in two sentences of the First Epistle of John: "This is how God showed His love for us: He sent His only Son into the world that we might have life through Him. This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven" (1 John 4: 9-10 TEV).

Anyone who understands the basic idea of God revealing Himself and asking us to be other Christs sees that he has encountered the Living God, or rather that God has made Himself known and brought about this encounter, and we have to do something about it. God initiates in us the movement of a return to Him. It is a matter of our whole person responding to the love of another, who is in this case God himself.

In other words, the revelation of the Scriptures puts us into an encounter where we have a serious choice to make. The long build-up of revelations through the Old Testament reaches fulfillment in Christ—Christ and all who give witness to Him sow the seed of the word in our hearts — we then must choose between Christ who is God and the world.

Faith then becomes a decision for Christ and God, and it touches every part of our lives.

Many older Catholics, I know, will feel that this is Protestant language. They will complain that it sounds like some of the evangelistic radio programs they hear, not like the solid Catholic doctrine they received in their early days.

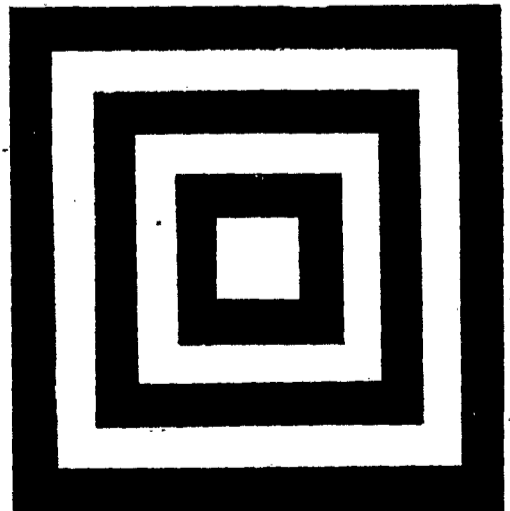
It is not Protestant language — it is the language straight out of the Sacred Scriptures. This is part of the core content of Christianity on which, fortunately Catholics and Protestants concentrate together.

Editor's Note

The Courier-Journal attempts, by the wide variety of opinion columns, to give both sides of the major issues of our day.

No one column, however, is indicative of the editorial position of the paper.

**FOR THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY ARE YOURS,
NOW AND FOR EVER.**



KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

Q. Two weeks ago you were discussing the future of religious communities. Would it be valid to suggest that the religious orders should look upon the apostolate of medical and nursing care as one of the challenges that might justify their continued existence?

A. Yes. Like the Church itself, religious communities do not exist in competition with the various agencies of government. The Church moves into those areas where certain human needs are not being met adequately or at all by governmental units.

The Christian community moves in to remind the larger political community of its responsibilities and/or to assist the political community in confronting those responsibilities.

Insofar as there are major problem areas in the United States today, whether in education, medicine, legal assistance, and so forth, there is a need for dedicated men and women to enter the lists to resolve these needs and to accept perhaps a more modest amount of financial remuneration in the process.

Those religious communities which have been wondering about their place in the Church of the future should at least raise the possibility of committing large and significant segments of their membership to medical, educational, and legal ministries, to work principally among and for the poor.

The Church is not a welfare agency alongside other welfare agencies. It is a community of faith which confesses that Jesus is Lord. But it exists also to realize his Lordship among men. Jesus is not Lord where justice is suppressed, where the cries of the poor are ignored, where there is sickness and ignorance.

It is to give credible and meaningful witness to the inbreaking of the Kingdom in Jesus of Nazareth and to give hope to all mankind that the Kingdom will come in all its fullness at the end of history that the Church commits itself at all to the task of diakonia.

Q. What does it mean to say that the Church is a "sacrament?"

A. The word "sacrament" means sign. In its early theological usage (e.g., by St. Augustine), it referred not to the seven specific sacraments of the Church but to any outward expression of invisible grace. Thus, Christ himself is the fundamental sacrament. In his humanity, he is the great sign of God's invisible presence in history.

The Church, too, is a sacrament. It embodies Christ's presence for mankind. It is an outward, visible sign of God's grace in history. The Church's message is this: God has won the victory over sin and death in Christ; humanity is really possible!

Insofar as men and women can look to the community of the Church and see how the triumphant grace of Christ has transformed, and is transforming, people into selfless, compassionate, sensitive, free human beings, to that same extent can they have confidence in the outcome of human history. History will succeed because God is present to it. And mankind can see God's presence working in and through the Church.

Q. Did Vatican II have anything to say about "death-of-God" theology, and is that particular theology itself dead? One rarely hears about it anymore.

A. The council did not address itself to death-of-God theology as such. This was a peculiarly American phenomenon which enjoyed its greatest popularity in the mid-1960's, at just about the time when the council was adjourning.

Vatican II did have much to say about atheism as such. (See the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 19-21). Remarkably, the council admitted that Christians themselves share some of the responsibility for the birth of atheism by reason of their own failure to live the Gospel, i.e., to practice what they preach.