

# Early Christian Experiences Are Identical to Today's

By FR. WALTER ABBOTT, S.J.

Please read Acts 2:42-47, then 4:32-37, and then 5:1-6:7. In these sections you will see several summaries of life among the early Christians. One of your first feelings, on reading these passages, will surely be marvel or wonder at the unity of the early Church in Jerusalem and the warm and universal fellowship the early Christians enjoyed.

You will surely marvel at their holding of property in common. They managed and sold property so that they could distribute money "among all according to what each one needed."

Some scholars claim that these summaries of life among the early Christians are idealized recollections, perhaps even

somewhat sentimental, composed toward the end of the first century.

Notice, however, that these summaries also mention daily meetings of the Christians in the Temple, to learn from the apostles, and daily meetings in homes for meals and prayers. I don't think that these are elements of idealized or sentimental recollection.

In fact, I think one can read between the lines and see, for example, essentially the same liturgical experience that the Christians had at the end of the first century and that we still have today.

The Eucharist was the cause and experience and expression of Christian fellowship with the risen Christ. The Eucharist was the core of the new Christian liturgy. It was normally accom-

panied by instruction and prayers.

I take it that Luke's account about the common holding of property and the effort to provide for everyone's needs was one of the earliest results of people taking their brotherhood in Christ through the Eucharist quite seriously.

Into this springtime paradise of the early Christian life there came "some time later" (Acts 6:1) the inevitable manifestation of human imperfection. There was "a quarrel between the Greek-speaking Jews and the native Jews" because the widows of the former group "were being neglected in the daily distribution of funds."

On the occasion of this quarrel the apostles made a decision. Putting first things first, they clarified that they should give their full time to "prayers and the work of preaching," and they called for the election of seven helpers to manage the financial matters.

It is commonly said that in

## KNOW YOUR FAITH

the choice of seven new helpers one sees the development of organization among the early Christians, that the choice of the apostolic helpers indicates there is a task for everyone in the Church, and that social service is important.

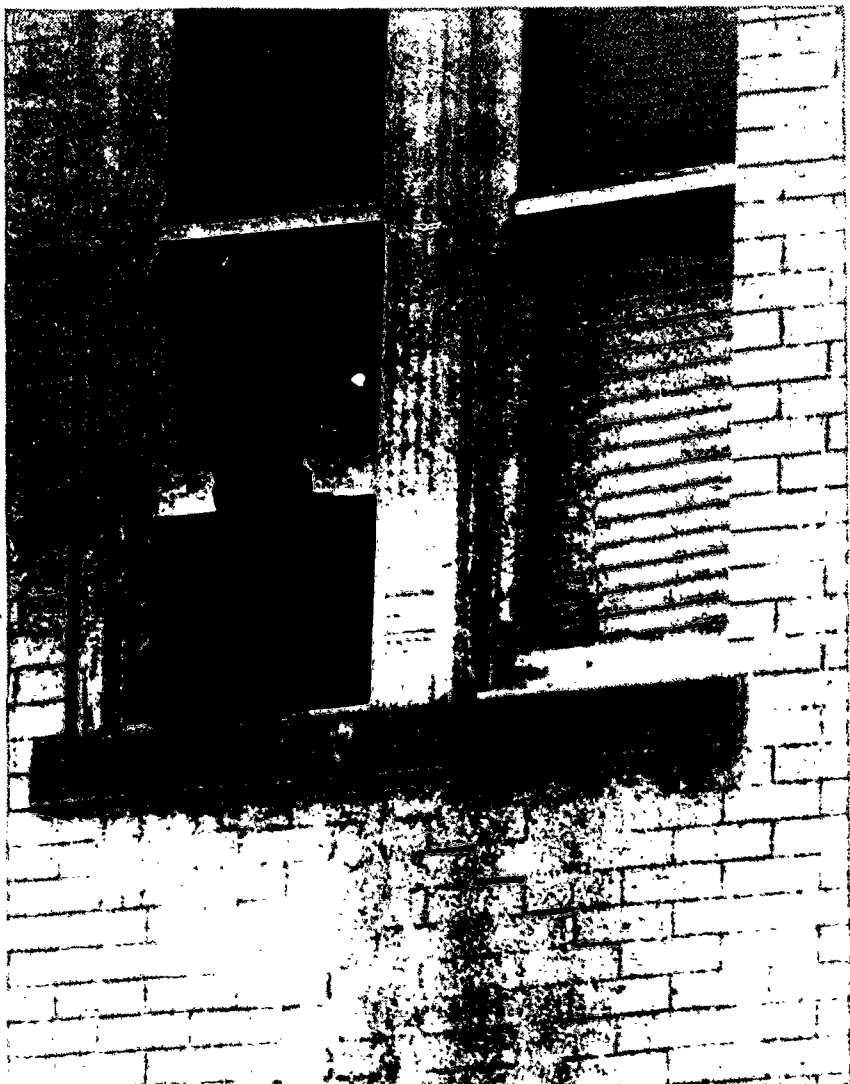
It is true that in this passage there is emphasis on the notion of service in the Church, and it is legitimate to recall how, in the preceding section of Acts (4:30), Peter and John and the rest of the Christians had prayed as servants of the Lord, making mention in their prayer of God's "holy Servant Jesus."

I think it is likely that what the apostles did in this matter of the seven was to set up a hierarchy for the Hellenist, or Greek-speaking element in the

Christian community of Jerusalem. In this theory, the seven were ordained by the apostles and were loosely subordinated to them.

The apostles, you will notice, called for the election of men "known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Subsequently we find the men preaching, baptizing, and giving witness to the faith in many ways (strictly speaking, we read only of the first two, Stephen and Philip, and the rest are not mentioned again in the book).

One tradition in the Church regards these men as the first deacons, but they are not called deacons in the Acts (the word "deacon" comes from the Greek word meaning "to serve" or "to give service").



Perhaps by merely watching the world go by, one is able to reconcile a reality with ideals. (NC Photo)

## Divine Office Is for the Laity

By FR. JOSEPH CHAMPLIN

The provisional breviary under preparation for certain English-speaking countries is entitled "The Prayer of the Church." That title seems particularly appropriate since the Divine Office "is intended to be the public and common prayer of the People of God. One of the main aims of the new breviary is that its riches should not be reserved to priests and Religious, but should also be a prayer book which many of the faithful could use whether in church or on their own."

Some feel this represents dreamy, ivory tower thinking. They point to the Divine Office's monastic background, the general decline of interest upon the part of the laity in formalized prayer and their eagerness for spontaneous, quiet, less wordy meditation, the psalms' archaic and unclear content. Contemporary man, in their view, simply has no desire to follow in prayer medieval pat-

terns or even primitive Christian formulas.

We will know after a few years. I personally would not be surprised to see this revised breviary receive an enthusiastic welcome in the United States. It did in France. Doesn't that huge publishing success in a supposedly "pagan" nation reveal the thirst of many for this type of prayer manual? Doesn't that reception illustrate the always current power and presence of God's words, even if written in an earlier time and for a different culture?

Doesn't that distribution to hundreds of thousands indicate the Divine Office can assist all Christians, clerical or lay, in our common struggle to reach the Transcendent, the Other, the God of all creation?

The Chapman breviary, authorized on April 9 of this year for interim use in England and Wales and confirmed soon after by the Congregation for Divine

Worship contains these parts:

Two major hours: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, corresponding to the former Lauds and Vespers;

And Office of Readings to be said at whatever time of the day is most suitable or as a vigil on the afternoon or evening of the day before;

A Midday Prayer similar to the Little Hour or Hours of the earlier breviary;

A Night Prayer, comparable to Compline.

The Liturgy Constitution, in establishing principles for revision of the Divine Office, specifically decreed "By the venerable tradition of the universal Church, Lauds as a morning prayer and Vespers as evening prayer are the two hinges on which the daily Office turns; hence they are to be considered as the chief hours and are to be celebrated as such." Article 89a.

## Q. and A.

By FR. RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

**Q.** The Supreme Court of the United States, by a 5-3 majority, has just ruled that a person may apply for exemption from military service as a conscientious objector even if he does not base his objection on religious principles. Each local draft board will have to decide on the seriousness and sincerity of the draftee's ethical or philosophical convictions. The new Selective Service Director is insisting that the applicant for CO status must be opposed to all wars, not just the war in Vietnam, and that his views must stem from some kind of rigorous training and some system of belief. I think it is impossible to be a conscientious objector without religious motivation, Am I wrong?

**A.** In its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the council declared: "Moreover, it seems right that laws make humane provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community" (n. 79).

The council document does not say that these laws should protect only the consciences of religiously motivated people. It leaves room for the possibility that young men with no apparent religious convictions may seek CO status and it argues that the State should, through its legislative machinery, protect their rights.

Such a view would be consistent with the council's more fully and more explicitly articulated position on the problem of religious freedom. When it teaches that every human person has a right to religious freedom (whether to act in a particular religious way, or not to act religiously at all), the council is assuming that conscience is not a commodity limited to religious people alone. Nonreligious people have consciences, too, and they have all the rights which flow from its free exercise. (See the Declaration on Religious Freedom, n. 2).

To suggest, therefore, that only religiously committed young men can be sincere in their conscientious objection to military service seems to conflict with the basic theological orientation of the Second Vatican Council. Whatever the legal merits or demerits of the recent Supreme Court decision, its theological presuppositions cannot be faulted.

**A.** A pastor in one of the Catholic churches in our diocese recently invited two college students to address the Sunday congregation on the war in Vietnam. To put it mildly, their visit was

controversial. Many people stalked out of the church. Although we, too, oppose the Administration's policies in Southeast Asia, we are uneasy about the use of the pulpit (with "captive audience" and all) for the promotion of one view alone. And yet we can't agree with so many of our fellow Catholics that the war issue has no place at all in our pulpits.

**A.** Those who believe that the war issue has no place in the pulpit probably feel the same way about issues of racial justice, fair housing, and so forth. They come to church on Sunday to pray and to hear reassuring things about God and his love for us.

In good conscience, they are convinced that the business of the Church is "religious," and by that they mean prayer, worship, catechesis, sacraments, devotions, and private counselling. Politics and social questions are beyond its scope and its competence.

Unfortunately, there are more of these Catholics around than many would care to admit. In 1968 the Gallup poll found that 57% of American Catholics opposed the involvement of the Church in matters of social and political significance. This conclusion was confirmed in another survey, taken the following year, by the National Opinion Research Center.

The reluctance of American Catholics to see the connection between their Christian faith and their lives in the social and political world is one of the most pressing pastoral problems we face. The Second Vatican Council called this tendency to divide our faith from our worldly experience one of the "more serious errors of our age."

On the other hand, those who attempt to make this connection between the Gospel and life must be aware that their judgment is fallible, and subject to bias and prejudice. Therefore, it seems to me, that we must preserve some kind of proportion between detailed commentary on contemporary issues and the possibility of "talk-back."

The preaching of the Church cannot be so general and so bland that it has no force or application at all. Yet, the more specific and concrete it becomes, the more opportunity must there be for genuine dialogue and for the responsible expression of alternate points of view.

In some parish circumstances, this may call for the establishment of coffee-hours immediately after Sunday Mass, where the parishioners could have an opportunity for discussion and/or opposition.