

On the Road, Giving Witness to Christ

By FR. WALTER ABBOTT S.J.

Look at Chapter 8 in the Acts of the Apostles. From it we learn some fascinating things about the apostles and their early assistants, "the seven." From it we also learn some things about giving witness to the Christian faith that are as true today as they were in those early Christian days.

Notice that the chapter begins with a scattering of the Church. Except for the apostles, the members of the young Church. Except for the apostles, salem, to escape what Luke calls

Any Jew of that day would regard it as a curse from God a "cruel persecution" there. If he were forced to flee from the Holy City. No doubt the

early Christians, who were all Jews, had a lot of this feeling in their hearts as they fled to the nearby areas of Judea and Samaria.

It turns out, however, that they are not cursed by God. On the contrary, he shows his loving and protecting presence with them by "great wonders and miracles." Wherever they go, they give witness to their belief in God and his Messiah, Jesus, and they make converts, including even a renowned magician named Simon.

The apostles Peter and John come out from Jerusalem to check up on this remarkable development. They take part in it and give it something more (see verses 14-17) before mak-

ing their way back to Jerusalem.

Some scholars hold that this first Christian missionary work was done only among the Jews of Judea and Samaria. One of their arguments is that the extending of the faith to Gentiles comes later, in Chapter 10 when Peter baptizes Gentiles in the house of the Roman soldier Cornelius.

It has been rightly said that Chapter 8 of the Acts presents an all-important turning-point in the history of the primitive Church. In this chapter we see the beginning of the development of the world-wide Church.

Do you think this early preaching described in Chapter

8 was the outcome of missionary planning on the part of the Apostles? I don't find any evidence of such an idea. I think, when you read the chapter, you will have to conclude that the Church grew not by any hierarchical planning but by the providential action of the Holy Spirit.

You might say that the Holy Spirit got them moving before they had even begun to think about it. I can well imagine some of them thinking things were going just too fast. It must have been quite an experience for them to see the Spirit giving the treasure of the faith to people they naturally considered as outcasts. Remember, they were Jews, and Jews regarded Samaritans and eunuchs as outcasts.

Luke must have had all this in mind when he composed Chapter 8. In fact, I think he underlines these ideas in his account of Philip and the Ethiopian (verses 26-40). Missionary planning would not have taken Philip out to a desert road in the heat of the day. The fact seems clear that Philip obeyed an odd, one might even say an absurd command from the Holy Spirit.

Philip had the opportunity, in this case, to preach the good news of salvation to one person, a distinguished person at that, and we see him put everything he has into it. In the process, we are given insights into how the Apostles and their assistants used the Old Testament. It is the kind of thing Jesus taught them to do.



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Government Programs And Families

By MICHAEL TAYLOR

(Mr. Taylor is a staff-member of the Family Life Bureau, United States Catholic Conference)

In their pastoral letter, *Human Life in Our Day* (Nov. 15, 1968), the U.S. Bishops cited the need for "comprehensive and realistic family-centered policies during the course of this century."

In trying to concretize the Bishops' directives, the Diocesan Family Life Directors specified a series of cases in which they recommended positive governmental action, for example the passage of the Family Assistance Program, the funding of the Housing Act of 1968, the establishment of child welfare programs ("Social Responsibility of the Family Life Apostolate," Sept. 6, 1969).

The most important of these measures, the Family Assistance Program, has successfully passed the House of Representatives. It is now stalled in the Senate Finance Committee. This legislation needs the bipartisan support that it received in the House.

In April the American Bishops cited this welfare reform measure as "landmark legislation" that deserves passage. "Poverty in the midst of affluence is indefensible, particularly the privation of children, the old and the handicapped . . . who make up the great bulk of those receiving assistance." FAP will come up for a Senate vote after Sept. 1.

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Governmental programs that relate to family life can be positive, as in FAP, or they can be negative, as in coercive birth control programs, the use of economic "disincentives" to limit family size to two children or abortion law relaxation. The human relationships of family life are intimate, personal and sacred. Governmental programs should seek to support these relationships. Human nature runs deep. The eagerness of commitment or the heat of political debate can at times blur our understanding of the richness of family life.

With birth control programs a danger to productive freedom is subtly created by the way information on contraception is presented. The context is part of the meaning conveyed. When contraceptive information is presented to young or uneducated persons without reference to a broader structure of human relations, the message conveyed may well be that contraception is the only precondition of sexual intercourse.

It is far from proven that "Zero Population Growth" is so imperative that governmental enforcement of the two-child family is justified. What is clear is that economic "disincentives" are discriminatory. The wealthy could have the

number of children that they desired and they would be able to absorb the extra tax burden. The poor could not.

Our social welfare programs depend ultimately on the concept that the least useful persons in society share in the dignity that comes from being human. On this basis, then, is there not a clash in government policy between the concept of economic "disincentives" and the Family Assistance Program?

The abortion issue raises very fundamental questions about human life. The abortion advocates argue that abortion is a fundamental right of women, based on their right to absolute control over their bodies. The humanity of the fetus is determined by the perceived humanity of the woman.

Some Catholics, misinformed about the nature of the abortion controversy, excuse themselves from any personal responsibility for this human and social issue. They fail to realize that governmental action to legalize abortion will teach that the unborn child, and any other innocent human life, is not sacred if it is of poor "quality" or if it will disturb the "quality" of society.

Q. and A.

By FR. RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. The Church of the Brethren has just voted its support of those young men who refuse to be drafted into military service. They were not talking about conscientious objectors. They were concerned with people who just will not heed their nation's call to its defense. I know the Catholic Church has supported conscientious objectors in the past, but have we come to the point where we might adopt the same kind of policy that the Church of the Brethren has now adopted? I hope not.

A. The stand taken by the Church of the Brethren is not surprising. It has always stood forth as a vigorous champion of nonviolence and peace.

The Catholic Church has, indeed, supported the principle of conscientious objection to military service (see the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 79), but it has never taken an official stand regarding draft resistance.

On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council commended those young men who serve their countries in the military when such service is for the sake of the security and freedom of their own people or of other peoples whose freedom is being unjustly threatened (see the same section of the Pastoral Constitution).

On the other hand, the council did not write a blank check on behalf of military service. It was aware that some military expeditions and the political policies supporting such expeditions can be unjust and reprehensible. In other words, one can never say, "My country, right or wrong!"

Consequently, we cannot automatically and absolutely exclude the possibility that outright draft resistance could, under certain circumstances, be completely justifiable, or even morally imperative.

Q. The renewal of fighting between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland has been the source of much discouragement to me personally. I have been harboring a faint hope that, when all the dust settles, the Church will come out of this age of change and transition in a much stronger and more attractive position. I think that all this bloodshed in Northern Ireland is setting the Church back hundreds of years, or at least several generations. How can anyone be drawn to the Church as the Body of Christ when they see its members literally killing one another?

A. I agree. In the past, we have tended to look upon the defense of the Christian faith (i.e. "apologetics") as an intellectual, and almost rationalistic, task. This attitude has changed, particularly as we have broadened our understanding of the meaning of revelation, doctrine, Sacred Scriptures, and man himself.

The First Vatican Council insisted, however, that the Church itself must be the strongest argument on behalf of the Gospel. If people can see the good things that happen when men, women, and children are open to the Word of God in Jesus Christ, they will begin to take seriously the truth of that Word and of the Church which presumes to proclaim it.

There is no question about it: the strife among Irish Christians today is one of the strongest apologetic arguments against the claims of the Christian Church. Such enmity makes a mockery of the Lord's own words: "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, that you should have love one for another."