

# God-Talk and Christianity

By FR. CARL J. PETER

Does talk about God have anything to do with Christian believing? Saint Paul was one who thought it did. His case may be instructive today.

As far as the articulation of that Faith was concerned, Paul was very definite. No language does justice to God.

However indispensable, recourse to biblical descriptions from the Old Testament was not a satisfactory solution. Passages could be quoted repeatedly and yet fail to help man grasp what God was about in His Son Jesus and what man was summoned to in Faith. No amount of biblical God-talk from the past would suffice.

For Paul, the events of his own day could be interpreted in such a way that God appeared to be either untrue to

His promises or unfair in His freedom. This dilemma is treated for three full chapters in the Epistle to the Romans (IX-XI).

The phenomenon giving rise to this concern is the scandal he speaks of in connection with the conversion of the Gentiles. Had God been unfaithful to the promises He made of messianic goods to the seed of Abraham? Was He ignoring in His freedom the service His people had rendered for generations? Was He free on the one hand or faithful on the other?

For Paul some assertions about God were excluded by his experience and confession of Jesus Christ. And yet he balanced this concern for religious language by noting that all is said that must be, God's ways cannot be ultimately justified to man.

Christian faith begins with the experience of a mystery that brings out thoughtful talk on man's part.

It is important to remember one thing. Paul reacted to the divine inscrutability not by unbroken silence but by speaking of God out of a context of living faith. His hope in so doing was that such talk might help other believers grow in their faithful acceptance of the God revealed by Jesus. For him the expression of faith could not remain static; it had to develop or be untrue to the Lord who called for it.

God chose human speech to reveal but not to imprison Himself. Hence the last word about Him will not have been spoken until Christian faith has given way to eternal sight.

## KNOW YOUR FAITH

### Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

**Q:** There is much talk nowadays about "zero population growth." We are being urged by people who seem to have very serious academic credentials to limit our families to two children. Young people on college campuses have pledged to do so limit themselves, or even to have no children at all. It's probably only a short while before legislation will be proposed making such limitation mandatory. I'm concerned, of course, about the strain an excessive population places on the world's resources. But the idea of a mandatory limitation is abhorrent to me. I suppose the Church's answer is to get more mileage out of our natural resources. Am I correct in assuming that the Church opposes all forms of family limitation?

**A:** The Church does not oppose every form of family limitation. On the contrary, Vatican II insisted that people should be "judiciously informed of scientific advances in the exploration of methods by which spouses can be helped in arranging the number of their children." However, "the reliability of these methods should be adequately proven and their harmony with the moral order should be clear" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 87).

If the Church does not oppose every kind of family limitation, then it also follows that the Church does not naively assume that the population problem can be solved merely by making better use of the world's natural resources. This is, indeed, part of the answer, as all men of good will readily admit, but it is not the whole answer.

There is nothing morally wrong with the views proposed by the "zero population growth" advocates. Their chief spokesman, Dr. Paul Ehrlich, has specifically opposed any coercive techniques in bringing this about. Catholics who are impressed with his arguments are free to take several possible options: they may choose to marry or not to marry; if they marry, they may choose to have two children at most or no children at all.

Other Catholics may believe that the real problem in this country is not so much population growth as population distribution.

Whichever view one adopts, it is impossible to avoid the judgment that there is, indeed, a serious world population problem today. Ignoring this problem or ridiculing people who are striving to alleviate it do not seem to be viable Christian responses.



#### Wonder

The mystery of raindrops on the window becomes the occasion for prayerful wonder from a child. This reverence also draws adults into the contemplation of the mystery of life itself. (NC Photo by John T. Allen.)

## Faith Is Loving and Knowing

By FR. CARL PFEIFER, SJ

One of the most exciting, risk-filled moments of a person's life occurs when he or she speaks two brief words: "I do."

With those words a man and woman pledge their lives to each other, in unconditioned trust and love. Two people promise to share good times and bad even unto death. Their self-giving is so profound and all-encompassing that "a man must leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two become one body" (Gen. 2:24; Mt 19:5).

It may be surprising for many adult Catholics to learn that it is just this joyful, responsible commitment of marriage that God uses to tell us about the relationship of faith to which He invites us, His People. In the Bible, faith is likened to the marriage bond or "covenant."

A beautiful passage typical of many others is found in the prophet Hosea. God is speaking of His People:

"That is why I am going to lure her and lead her out into the wilderness and speak to her heart. . . . There she will respond as she did when she was young, as she did when she came out of the land of Egypt. . . . When that day comes — It is Yahweh who speaks — she will call me, 'My husband'."

When Paul speaks of faith in the Letter to the Romans, he refers back to the words of Hosea (Rom 9:25-26). He de-

scribes faith in terms of a marriage-covenant, and describes how the saving faith of Abraham was characterized by an absolute placing of himself in the hands of God (Rom 4:18-25). Faith is viewed in Old and New Testaments as a personal commitment to God in response to His gracious advances.

The reason this may be somewhat surprising to many of us is that we learned in our catechism classes, and later perhaps in college theology classes, that faith was basically an intellectual assent to truths revealed by God. The Baltimore catechism states: "Faith is the virtue by which we firmly believe all the truths God has revealed, on the word of God revealing them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived (#122)."

Faith was seen as accepting the truths of faith revealed by God and handed down from age to age by the Church. Many catechisms were organized around "the truths we must believe."

The more traditional understanding of faith is clearly expressed in the first sentence of the Creed, "I believe in God, the Father all mighty. . . ." The object of faith is God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Catholics believe first in "the First Truth," namely God, and only secondarily in truths that express the Church's experience of God in living out the covenant. "Eternal life is knowing you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

What the Bible and early Church Fathers taught is summarized in the famous statement of St. Thomas Aquinas, long the Church's most respected theologian: "the act of believing does not terminate in a proposition of faith, but in the reality."

In other words when we say "I believe" we are affirming something about our personal relationship with God much more than an assent to revealed truths taught by the Church.

We express a trusting commitment to God, "For better or for worse, in good times and in bad." Our faith in truths revealed by God and preserved in the Church makes sense only within the context of faith-commitment to Him who is "the Truth" (Jn 14:6). Faith, in the most traditional sense, is an act of love and desire by which a person gives himself to God, with absolute trust in His powerful love.

In another example of development of doctrine in the Church the Vatican Council II reaffirms the richer, biblical, traditional notion of faith without denying the element of assent to revealed truths. "The obedience of faith" (Rom 16:26; cf. 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering "the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals," and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. (Revelation, 5).

## The Letter From James

By Fr. Walter M. Abbott, SJ

"From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Some scholars say that the short book of the New Testament which begins with those words is the oldest or earliest part of the New Testament, with the exception of the parts about the suffering and death of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels. If they are right, and I think they are, it may be especially instructive to look at this letter from the point of view of development of doctrine.

Other scholars argue that the letter attributed to James came much later; but it is true that authorship, date and other things about the letter are much disputed still.

You can hold that the letter was written early in the first century because it reflects, like other New Testament letters, the expectation of an imminent parousia (the word refers to the second and final coming of the Lord when he will judge the living and the dead). Or you can argue that it is late first-century because verse 7 of Chapter 5 indicates concern over the delay of the parousia. We will have more to say about that expectation expressed in the Scriptures which was not fulfilled as the writers obviously thought it would be.

Consider the passage on prayer and anointing for the sick, where I hope you will see that the first end of the anointing is to heal, a clarification which we fully recovered through the Second Vatican Council.

Consider the famous passages on faith and actions (1:19-25 and 2:14-26), which include the sayings that "a man is put right with God by what he does (older translations use the term "justified" for "put right with God") and not because of his

faith alone (2:24) and "faith without actions is dead (2:26)" —tenets which Luther could not reconcile with the letters of Paul, especially the one to the Romans, and therefore came the whole classical dispute about justification and good works.

Some scholars have held that James was deliberately attacking Paul, or Paul's doctrine that man is put right with God by faith alone. For the past four hundred years, ever since the Reformation, scholars have been knocking themselves out trying to determine the relationship between James and Paul, or rather between their ideas on faith and works.

I agree with the group of scholars who hold that James was not disputing Paul at all but was simply handling the question about what was the importance of a Christian's conduct after his baptism. His answer was that good deeds are the proof of faith; therefore faith and good works save a man.

Perhaps, when you have read the letter, you will say James held not that we are saved through faith plus works but that we are saved through genuine, as opposed to counterfeit, faith. It would be the difference between dead and living faith. You would then be on the road that leads to a decision that there is really no difference between the doctrines of James and Paul.

Perhaps you will be inclined rather to hold, as some scholars do, that James attacked not Paul but a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching. Perhaps you will decide, with still other scholars, that their views were different, that's all, not contradictory but just different. We'll look at Paul's teachings and come back to this quest