

The Trinity Today - - Needs More than Silence

By FR. CARL J. PETER

Are Father, Lord Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit just synonyms for God? Do they refer to the same divine reality so that differences between them are minimal? Answers to these questions have a profound effect on

the way one understands man's needs and hopes at the present time.

In passing over such questions or ignoring them, the Christian fails to do all he can to help humanity grasp the meaning of life. Silence is not

enough; too much is at stake.

As a technical term, Trinity appeared late on the scene in Christian theology.

But the New Testament does speak often of God the Father, the Lord Jesus, and the Holy

Spirit. The context is their relation to humanity. What they do for man, how they figure in human events, who they are for individuals and communities, is how they are presented. But what would these three be, in relation to one another if man were out of the picture?

That question became much more important for believers after the New Testament had been written. To some who are practical-minded, this may seem to be a case of idle curiosity or a distraction from concern for the widow and orphan. To be sure, it could have been either. But to Christians of the fourth century it was just the opposite.

Saint Athanasius is a good example. He saw a direct connection between what one believes of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit and the way one is to conduct himself as a result. Whether both are truly God makes a great deal of difference in determining the claim they make on man's life-style.

More technically, relating the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit to the Father as creatures, to their Creator amounts to a denial of the saving powers of all three. Words make a difference for better or worse.

As is the case where only human beings are involved, so with man in relation to the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit; one can describe his relation with each so deficiently that living it becomes impossible.

It was to this need for a de-

velopment in the wording of Christian faith that the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople responded. To an existing profession of faith just enough was added to make it clear that the Son and Holy Spirit are on God the Father's side of the dichotomy between Creator and creatures.

This was a real development.

What was said in the New Testament regarding Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit had, like all words, a past, a present, and above all a future not fully apparent to any but God.

One part of that future meaning dawned on men in the fourth century. As a result, a technical terminology developed, especially in Western Europe, to voice the trinitarian belief of Christians. Theologians began to speak of one nature, two processions, three persons; four relations, and five notions.

Many today find this exercise in mathematics brings little or no understanding of their own relationship to the Triune God. For them it is time for theologians to speak again of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Can it be that each of these three is the dimension forming the infinite horizon in which all men are called to live and breathe and have their being?

One thing is sure. The New Testament means more when it reveals them than man has been able to grasp and say so far.



Faith in the World

The huge statue of Atlas in New York's Rockefeller Center frames the spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral, as a symbol of the humanness of Faith. (RNS photo by Gerry Davis)

The Humanness of Faith

By FR. JOHN T. BYRNE

The act of faith takes place in a human situation — a human set of circumstances. It takes place at this moment — in this place — in this family — in the midst of these people.

These circumstances form the psychological setting for faith and they are its human dimension.

We do not mean to say of course that the act of faith is a purely human thing. It is essentially divine. "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him." But as is so often the case, the Divine works through the human. God is operating in and through the human set of circumstances.

A glance at various religions tells us that they are concerned with the Mystery of God manifested primarily in creation and in the conscience of man. But the history of religion from this view point is not an entirely impressive one. Man has had strange ideas of God and even stranger ideas of what is right and wrong.

If this is all he has, it may suffice to put him in contact with God and he may be touched by divine grace. But this disclosure of God in creation is certainly not satisfactory. It is appropriate, indeed it seems that it is necessary that the personal God disclose himself in history, to persons and through persons.

The New Testament tells us that he did just this. For God spoke in times past to the fa-

thers through the prophets and last of all in these days has spoken to us by His Son. God revealed himself in history and looked at from that viewpoint it is called the history of (man's) salvation. It was in the history of a people — the people of God — the Jewish nation. All of this was very human but the divine was operating in it. Finally he revealed himself in a way that drew all previous revelations together. This was in a Man — Jesus, who Faith tells us is the Son of God.

There is a statement in Scripture about Jesus which is most important. It says, "No one has at any time seen God. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him" (Jn 1:18).

Jesus then is the only one who can really tell us about God. We believe Jesus. This is the act of Faith — accepting a person and believing him. This is what we mean when we say: Faith is not only the assent to a group of propositions. It is the acceptance of and assent to a person — Jesus Christ. Of course we accept what Jesus taught also and this is where the propositions come in. This is where the Creed enters.

Now history did not stop when Jesus entered it. It continued and still continues. And the Church is the means of historical continuity between us and Jesus. The Church tells us about Jesus. The Church is a living Community established by Jesus which has given witness to him and what he taught throughout history. It still does just that. But this is

all very human too. Yet the Divine is at work in it. This is the Mystery of the Church telling us about the Mystery of Jesus. The Act of Faith for a Christian is believing Jesus as the Church presents him to us and believing what Jesus taught us as the Church presents it to us.

Now this Act of Faith has all sorts of difficulties depending upon the time and place that it is to be made. A rational age, one that exalts reason and science, makes a man hesitate before the Act of Faith. We are even tempted to submit the Act of Faith to rational analysis and it usually comes out poorly. Also the Community which is the Church presents difficulties. At times we think it is almost too human to be a vehicle for Faith. Its spokesmen confuse us — shake our Faith. Their actions at other times scandalize us.

Today is certainly no exception. In fact it seems to us who are alive today that this is one of the worst possible times for Faith. It is a rationalistic age and the Church is suffering a crisis. Yet there are indications that reason and science are not satisfying man's needs. A whole wave of anti-rationalism seems to be engulfing us and proposing problems of anguish, dread, boredom and even despair because man does not understand the meaning of his own existence. Some men by these very thoughts are being moved to make the Act of Faith in God. This is only the human situation which surrounds the act of Faith and grace must be there — but the human aspect of Faith cannot be ignored.

Wednesday, December 9, 1970

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. McBRIEN

Q. Ever since the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, many dioceses throughout the country have established senates of priests to assist the bishop in caring for the Catholic people committed to him. More recently there has been some movement in the direction of establishing parish, diocesan, and even national councils, involving laity as well as clergy and religious. This all sounds very fine in theory, but in practice can't the pastor or bishop do exactly as he pleases? What real authority can such councils ever hope to achieve?

A. There is no overriding theological reason why such councils could not enjoy full deliberative authority, in union with the pastor or bishop. The mission of the Church is the responsibility of the whole People of God (see the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 30). If all are responsible for the work of the Church, then all — at least in principle — must share in making policies and laws which are designed to realize and to fulfill that work.

The laity and so-called "lower clergy" do not participate only in the mission of the hierarchy but rather "in the saving mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself" (n. 33).

Why is it, then, that senates of priests and parish or diocesan councils are always regarded as having only consultative, not deliberative power? Why are most, if not all, of them established as purely advisory groups, without prejudice to the final authority of the pastor or bishop?

The reason is that law usually reflects the theology upon which it is based. When the Code of Canon Law was produced more than fifty years ago, it was generally assumed that the Church is an absolute monarchy, with the pope at the top of the pyramid. The legal structure of the Code embodies that basic assumption. For all practical purposes, a bishop enjoys the same kind of monarchical authority in his own diocese and a pastor, on a much lesser scale, in his own parish.

Under the multiple impact of the ecumenical, biblical, and liturgical movements, Catholic theology began to change its understanding of the nature and mission of the Church.

The documents of the Second Vatican Council reveal some of the principal achievements of post-World War II Catholic thought: The Church is the People of God. All are responsible for the mission of the Church. The Church is a collegial, not monarchical reality. And so forth.

As the theology of Vatican II seeps into the consciousness of Catholic people in general and Catholic lawmakers in particular, we shall all experience a basic structural change in the life and work of the Catholic Church. If we are to judge by the unusually effective work of the Canon Law Society of America over the last four or five years, we can safely predict that these constructive reforms are not far off.

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