

What Jesus Thought of Himself

By FATHER WALTER ABBOTT, SJ

Look at how real and how human is the Jesus of Luke's account.

I often think that the face of Jesus comes through Luke's account very much like the way it is in a large poster on the wall of my office at the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, one in a series of twelve posters by Australian artist Eric Smith illustrating the Apostles' Creed (Liturgical Press of Australia, Limited).

That poster, of rich red and yellow colors, shows the face of a man with very large eyes breaking through three rows of Gospel pages (actually, when you look closer, you discover the artist has put in his poster pages from the Gospel according to John).

The face is in tones of red, the pages in yellow. In the upper right corner of the poster you see, in large letters looking as if they were drawn by a finger dipped in blood, "The Word Made Flesh." The face speaks of gentleness, yes, but more of strength and power, and you don't have to read the small print in the brochure that comes with the posters to discern the awareness of coming suffering in the large, wide-open eyes.

Whatever Jesus actually looked like — it is curious that Luke, otherwise so very observant and thoughtful, has given

us no details about Jesus' personal appearance — the face in this poster makes him look like the king that the angel told Mary her child would be, "He will be great . . . a king, as his ancestor David was . . . the king of the descendants of Jacob . . ." You will remember that the angel added, "his kingdom will never end."

In that message of the angel the notion of kingship is mentioned three times. One can certainly conclude, therefore, that the message stresses the notion. Throughout Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, however, he does not present Jesus as calling himself the Messiah nor does he use the title king, though Jesus is presented as giving some clues that he is more than just a prophet.

In Luke's account, Jesus keeps calling himself the "Son of Man." Scholars are still arguing about just what Jesus meant by that term, and what later writers such as Luke and Paul would have taken it to mean. Your commentary will explain the Old Testament background of the phrase, meaning "man" or "I," and will go into overtones in the different passages where Jesus is represented as using the expression, including connections with the suffering servant theme of Isaiah, chapter 53.

The day finally came, however, when Jesus, according to Luke's account, asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am," and Peter answered, "You are

God's Messiah!" (9:20), meaning that Jesus was the special anointed king sent by God according to the promises. Up to then, surely, the image Jesus must have presented to other people must have been that of a wandering prophet, which was not at all what the people expected the Messiah to be. Remarkable is the right word, therefore, for Peter's answer to Jesus' question. Do you agree that Luke's account implies Jesus accepted this statement of his messiahship? It seems so, doesn't it, from the sentence in which Luke writes that Jesus then gave the disciples strict orders not to reveal "this" to anyone. Remember, too, as we have already seen, on many other occasions Jesus seems to have complained that people were not using their heads and acknowledging him for what he was.

On the day of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus finally acknowledges his kingship publicly, at least to a certain extent, according to Luke's account. Then, when the elders, priests, and teachers of the Law assembled in Council ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, he does not so explicitly answer as he does in Mark's account, but he does not deny it. The way Luke tells it, Jesus apparently taught his disciples clearly and in detail about the facts of his kingship

and messiahship when he rose from the dead and spent some time with his disciples again before ascending into heaven. In Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles frequently tell the people that Jesus was the Messiah. Apparently, in their sermons, some of which are recorded or summarized, in the Acts of the Apostles, they were handing on what they learned from Jesus after the first Easter Sunday morning.

At various times, especially in the last fifty or sixty years, there have been writers who charged that the apostles created the fulfillment of kingship and messiahship in Jesus. In this way of looking at things, Luke invented the angel and put words in his mouth that were never really spoken, and Luke represented Peter professing something that he didn't really know until after the resurrection of Jesus, if even then, and the sentences which Jesus originally spoke were constantly edited to express ideas current in the later times of the apostles.

The traditional Christian view is that when Luke did his research he found what he put into his account, and therefore, for example, he put into his account both that Jesus avoided claiming publicly to be king

and Messiah and that he showed irritation when people didn't understand he was the king and Messiah. In this view, Luke enables us to see how it really was during the years when Jesus himself was traveling and teaching around the country.

There you have the opposing views. As you make your way through the chapters of Luke's Gospel you can be on the watch for evidence or for material to analyze critically.

The Gospel of Mark, by the way, has many references to Jesus wanting to keep secret the idea that he was the king and Messiah. Commentators often explain that apparently Jesus didn't want his spiritual message confused with current political hopes about the restoration of the monarchy, the line of David, etc. Some go so far as to say that Luke composed his Gospel to show the Roman government that Christianity posed no threat to Roman rule. Luke mentions this notion of secrecy only once, perhaps, you might say, because Mark's Gospel was so widely known. The other attitude, of irritation or complaint, was, apparently in Luke's judgment, not sufficiently well-known, so it goes into his account, even though it is hard to reconcile with the "keep secret" idea, and even though it brings other problems.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. As a Catholic laywoman, I was impressed by the recent actions of the pope in naming both St. Theresa of Avila and St. Catherine of Siena Doctors of the Church. According to the various news reports, these are the first women in the history of the Church to be so honored.

One item, however, distressed me very much. Vatican Radio, in commenting on the delay in conferring this title of Doctor upon these two saints, said that the authorities of the Church had to proceed very cautiously because it was "necessary to solve the question of whether the charisms of the word of knowledge and of wisdom were or were not granted to women."

I should have assumed that such attitudes had long since been dismissed as culturally-conditioned. Do you really think that perhaps the Holy Spirit speaks more frequently to men than to women?

A. No. However, it will probably take a long time before this anti-feminist bias is thoroughly uprooted from the consciousness of the Catholic Church. There is too much evidence for it in too many areas of Church history, beginning even with the New Testament itself.

Your suggestion that such a bias is more cultural than theological is correct. Indeed, there is no possible theological justification for the belief that the revelation of God or the charisms of his Spirit are directed primarily toward men and only rarely toward women.

The fact that men have politically dominated the Church during most of its lifetime is no theological argument on behalf of their religious superiority. Rather it is testimony to the stronger pull of cultural over against theological forces in shaping the mentality and policies of ecclesiastical life.

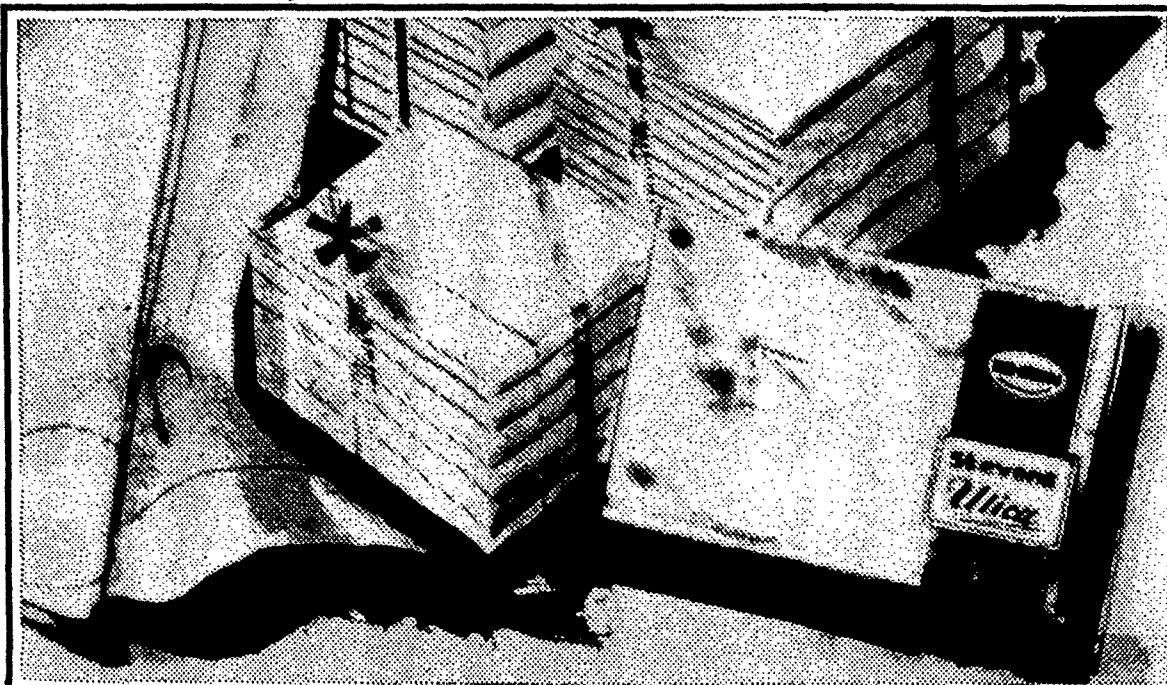
Fortunately, the tide has begun to turn, anticipated in part by the late Pope John XXIII's encyclical letter, Peace on Earth (1963), wherein he referred to the emerging influence of women as one of the major, positive trends of our age.

When the Second Vatican Council spoke on the question of women in society and in the Church, the council consistently argued on behalf of equality of rights for women and of a wider participation by women in the various fields of the Church's apostolate (see, for example, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, n. 9, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 9, 29, and 60).

It should be pointed out, however, that the council itself established a less than enviable performance record. Over the entire four years of the council's life (1962-5), there were never more than twelve laywomen and ten religious women involved in the proceedings, in the role of auditors (auditrices).

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