

The Humanness of Christ

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER

One of my happiest experiences in religious education was a year of discussions about the Bible with four Catholic couples in a small Midwestern town. We began with a reading of the Acts of the Apostles. The discussion following their private study of Acts was enthusiastic and lively. Although all were graduates of Catholic high school or college none had ever read through the Acts of the Apostles which they considered a kind of book they did not suspect was in the Bible.

The next book I suggested was the Gospel of Mark. I asked them to sit down and read Mark's brief Gospel from beginning to end — something none of them had ever done even in college scripture courses.

When we gathered for our meeting, in contrast to the enthusiasm of the previous week's discussion on Acts they were embarrassingly silent. A few polite remarks were made, but none seemed eager to get into a serious discussion.

I asked what the problem was. After more moments of tense silence one of the women finally said, "Father, after reading Mark I don't like Jesus anymore!" Others nodded that they shared similar feelings.

So I questioned them further: "What did you learn that has changed your feelings?" One of the men said he was surprised and shocked to read that Jesus really became angry and used very strong language. The women were more disturbed by the fact that Mark tells of Jesus

with prostitutes. All of them found Jesus' apparent coolness toward Mary disconcerting. On the whole they found reading Mark's Gospel a troubling experience.

We discussed this openly and it gradually became clear that they had become comfortable with an idea of Jesus that was much more middle-class, white American, than that portrayed by Mark. They also admitted that they were much more comfortable thinking of Jesus as God than as man. They found it hard to think of Jesus experiencing temptation as other men are tempted. It was difficult to grasp that He really did suffer and die, even though they professed this in the Creed. And they doubted that He made mistakes or had to study in order to learn.

I suggested that we next read the Gospel of Luke. The discussion this time was much more relaxed.

Luke, they found, portrayed Jesus in a gentler fashion. We

then went on to read and discuss other selections from various parts of the Scriptures, and gradually learned much more about the personality and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

I have spent time recalling this experience because it illustrates how persons can be taught an orthodox Catholic doctrine, in this case the Incarnation, and still not appreciate concretely what it implies.

During many centuries, for a variety of reasons rooted in complex historical circumstances, Catholic religious education tended to stress so strongly the divinity of Jesus, that His humanness was often not given proper emphasis. Religious education texts today attempt to present a better balance.

Without denying or "watering down" the doctrine of Jesus' divinity, they recognize the traditional, biblical insight that it is precisely through His humanity that His divinity is revealed. The richness and

visible and tangible in the depth of God's love are made gentle yet strong compassion of Jesus for His fellow man.

The more recent religion texts or "catechisms" try to help Catholics see Jesus as presented in the Gospels, a man like us in everything except sin.

The Gospels show us a man who could cry at the death of a friend and tremble with fear in His bravest moments; whose courage and strength were clothed in a gentle tenderness that attracted even the anxious; who struggled with temptations and grappled to make the right decisions.

His powers of forgiveness were as strong as His hatred of sin and hypocrisy. No one Gospel, not all the Gospels together, can fully portray the humanness of Jesus. But one and all proclaim that in Him, a man like us, can be seen the graciousness of God.

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. We were always taught that the religious life is superior to the married state. Marriage was never downgraded, of course. Christ, after all, made it a sacrament. But those who aspired to the priesthood or to membership in a religious community were regarded as seeking the highest Christian vocation. Is this still the thinking of the Church? Certainly the younger generation doesn't accept this line of thought.

A. Even though the Council of Trent emphasized the sacramental dignity of marriage, it also condemned those who maintained that "the married state is preferable to that of virginity or celibacy and that it is not better and more blessed to continue in the state of virginity or celibacy than to enter on the state of matrimony."

Trent offered several New Testament texts as supporting evidence: Matt 19:11 f., 1 Cor 7:25 f., 38, and 40. The view was reaffirmed by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical letter, "Sacra Virginitas," in 1954. It is probably fair to say that most Catholics, and certainly those in the over-30 generation, would regard this as common and indisputable Catholic teaching.

The Second Vatican Council does not explicitly repudiate those earlier papal and conciliar statements and it comes closest to reaffirming them in its Decree on Priestly Formation (n.10).

However, there is also some indication, specifically in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, that the council wished to move away from the idea that only those Christians who live a celibate life can really serve God with an undivided heart: "All of Christ's followers, therefore, are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their proper state" (n.42). Indeed, the chapter from which this line is taken is entitled "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness." The theme is developed most fully in article 40.

Why is it that so many lay people today resist any reinterpretation or modification of the earlier view that the religious state is preferable to their own? Is it because they do not like to see the magisterium of the Church change its mind on various key issues and thereby increase the sense of uncertainty and confusion among the faithful? Or is their own experience of marriage so unsatisfactory that they assume the unmarried state to be superior, almost by a process of elimination?

Perhaps this is true in some cases. But it seems that many of the Catholic laity are still happy with the traditional view (namely, that the religious life is objectively superior to the married state) because they understand that only the Religious and the priests are really bound to live the Christian life to its fullest. Only priests, monks, brothers, and nuns are seriously expected to be people of prayer, reflection, sacrifice, and penance. It is almost as if the laity share vicariously in the benefits which accrue from the spiritual activities and practices of the Religious.

The Second Vatican Council, without resolving the issue of the relative merits of celibacy and marriage, places the burden of perfect holiness where it belongs: on the whole Church. No one is exempt. If some Christians can more readily and effectively proclaim, signify, and facilitate God's kingdom by a life of celibacy, then so be it. Most Christians will find, however, that their quest of God's kingdom among men will be supported and realized from within the married state.

Q. Does this mean that celibacy is not an essential requirement for the priesthood or the religious life?

A. Celibacy is, at present, an essential legal requirement for the priesthood and religious life. And there are excellent reasons — in the New Testament, the Fathers of the Church, the earlier councils, and in theology — for a celibate priesthood, freely chosen. But there is no theological, doctrinal, or biblical argument for obligatory celibacy.

Celibacy was not always a requirement for ordination in the Catholic Church. Indeed, there are segments of the Catholic Church which have a married clergy. If the law is changed, it will not involve a change of doctrine or a change of theology. It will be a change of legal discipline only.

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