

FR. HENRY ATWELL

Toward Tomorrow



Up until the Vatican Council of ten years ago, students in the seminary were taught the various items of Catholic belief clearly, thoroughly and emphatically.

What other Christian scholars had to say on these various subjects were then listed as "adversarii" — what the "enemies" say about it.

None of the "adversarii" were ever invited to the seminary to explain why they said what they did, even if they really ever said it in the first place.

The impression we got was simply that we Catholics are, like the Dodge boys, nice guys, and everybody else is "adversarii — the enemy."

One of the first things to come through the windows Pope John opened was a realization that the "adversarii" aren't half as hostile as we had thought they were, some, as a matter of fact, were downright friendly, and quite a few of them were remarkably intelligent people.

The American Catholic bishops decided to get a bit better acquainted so they asked their new Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs to sit down with some of these other Christians and find out precisely what they do have to say on such subjects as baptism, communion, the bible and other similarly basic religious subjects.

Three such conversations — with Episcopalians, Lutherans and Baptists — are reported in a series of booklets recently published by the U.S. Bishops' Catholic Conference and the most obvious conclusion is that we'll just have to look for new "adversarii" because the old ones are now for sure our friends.

The Episcopal and Roman Catholic scholars expressed this in more formal and more technical language. They said: "We have made a careful study of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Lambeth Conference Report of 1958, the 1949 statement of faith and order of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S. and other

statements of the contemporary position of both our Churches. From these statements it is clear to us that the findings of modern biblical, theological and liturgical studies have transcended many of the polemical formulations of an earlier period."

The Lutherans were, of course, among the first to be listed as "adversarii" but conversations with them have brought both them and us to a conclusion like that with the Episcopalians. Topics discussed at great length and in great depth have included the gospel, baptism, eucharist or communion, and "ministry" or priesthood. These Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians reported, "A remarkable spirit of Christian understanding and fellowship has developed during the course of these conversations," and then later they stated, "We are convinced that current theological trends in both traditions give great promise for increasing convergence and deepened understanding of the eucharistic mystery."

Bishop John May of Mobile, Alabama, in opening a Baptist-Catholic conference a year ago, told the assembled delegates, "My mother never told me there would be days like this. I am sure she never dreamed of such a day." He was one of five Catholic bishops who attended the conference which drew delegates from nine southern states. At the conference's conclusion, Monsignor Bernard F. Law, director of the U.S. Bishops' national committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said, "... the presence and active participation of these bishops indicates the high level of commitment which the Catholic Church has to the bettering of relationships between Baptists and Catholics."

Abraham Lincoln was once asked what he thought was the best thing to do with enemies. He replied, "I try to make them my friends."

That was a good answer: It's good to see that Christian churches are trying to do just that same thing.



FR. PAUL J. CUDDY

On The Right Side

A thirtyish man remarked: "I was surprised to hear you recommend 'The Imitation of Christ.' I thought it was out." "Cheer up. Some people think prayer is out; the rosary and visits to the Blessed Sacrament are out. Some think the Catholic Church is irrelevant. It's not what people think that makes a thing so; but what IS. If I told you extramarital sex is all right I doubt that you would believe me. By the way, how did you become familiar with 'The Imitation'?" "At college. One of my professors recommended it. I used it for years and found it a great help; but a couple years ago I went to confession and the priest told me not to use it; that it's out of date." He paused a moment and added: "Of course, he has since left the priesthood."

"The Imitation" is a small book of devotion written in the 14th century for the Brothers of the Christian Life. Next to the Bible it has been the most popular book in the world, and has been printed in more languages than any book excepting the Bible.

It was written for religious teachers leading a monastic life. Therefore parts of it apply to their special way of life, viz., for celibate religious teachers. It has a wise and delightful remark for all religious male celibates. "Be familiar with no woman, but commend all good women to God." St. Paul certainly got along splendidly with women, and understood the feminine psychology of Evodia and Syntoche. But the celibate Paul did not get his nervous system entangled with any woman. He was gracious to all women. He valued and utilized their gifts for spreading the Gospel. He was their intimate friend, but only in the agape sense.

Why this recent condemnation of "The Imitation"? Partly, I think, because the book emphasizes life after death strongly. Yet does this not have scriptural warrant? Partly because it gives poor grades to being unduly involved in "the world," even as Our Lord did. The concept of baptizing the world which seems so new to many progressive religionists is as old as the Gospels. But the new interpretations

finds the baptizers frequently sucked into seductive waters and consumed by "the world" they started off to save. Our Lord was clear. "Father, it is for them (the disciples) that I pray. It is not for the world I pray. I am no longer in the world, and they are no longer in the world." (John 17)

"The Imitation," which is a constant echo of the Gospels reads, "This is the highest wisdom: by contempt of the world to tend towards the Kingdom of God." (Im. Bk 1) Brother Leo wrote: "The world here means, not the world of nature, but the works and spirit of men who live idle and degraded lives." A Kempis is accused of Manichean tendencies. The fact is that he views this life from the viewpoint of Christ: "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?"

"The Imitation" reveals a brilliant insight into human nature. How charming and funny and true is this gem: "A merry evening begets a sad morning." To this, those who know the morning after the night before give a hearty Amen. Religious communities today are constantly put to the test. This is not new. "It is no small matter to dwell in a religious community, to hold your place there without giving offence, and to continue faithful even unto death." (Bk. 1: Ch. 17) How wise this thought: "Occasions of adversity but discover how great virtue or strength each has. For occasions do not make a man frail, but show what he is." (Bk. 1: ch. 16)

St. Ignatius read the book 15 minutes every day, over and above his breviary. John Wesley, founder of Methodism was devoted to "The Imitation," as were Thomas More and Pope John XXIII. Ronald Knox brought out a new modern translation. It would seem to many that this book which helped produce holiness throughout 600 years is hardly a book of warped human nature or perverted Catholic theology. Any religious who takes the book seriously does not leave his vocation. Any layman steeped in "The Imitation" is steeped in the Gospel of the Lord.

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