

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## Reconciliation Within Myself

A THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION  
PART III

St. Paul's letter to the Christians of Rome has a remarkable revelation of the inner conflicts that raged within him, the schizophrenia that made him two persons — one wanting to do right, the other bent on evil. A moment's reflection on our own personal struggles will lead us to conclude that what he has to say about himself applies to all of us without exception. But, despite his admission of confusion about his aberrant conduct he has no doubt about the unique remedy for his illness: "Who will deliver me? God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 7:24-25)

When we speak of our sinfulness as schizophrenic, we do not apply the word as the modern psychiatrist does to one whose personality is so disintegrated that he has lost contact with his environment. Rather, we mean that a sinner is not the person God shaped him to be, because he is inwardly

divided. Genesis reveals that God created us in His own image (Gen. 1:27). The Fathers of the Church had many reflections on what it meant to image God. Though their ideas differed, one theme they all agreed upon — the model for imaging God is Jesus Christ, God's perfect likeness and His clarifying revelation of what we should be. St. Irenaeus claimed that Adam was made not simply in the image of God, but in the image of Christ to come. Even apart from sin, he claimed, God would have come to us in human flesh, because Christ was intended to be the model for our humanness — flesh in harmony with spirit, spirit in harmony with the Holy Spirit.

It is our sinfulness that destroys this harmony. The basic yearning of the heart for God's love remains, even though muted and silent, and the other self speaks audibly in words of rebellion. Such is the schizophrenia of sin. And though the rebellion may seldom be an absolute no to His love, we are divided whenever we play games with God and do not live wholeheartedly the logic of His dynamic presence within us. It is the rupture that happens whenever we compromise and try to serve two masters and do not live the life that burns and yearns within us.

The everyday experience of most of us is

not a definitive 'No' to God. Rather, it is the day-to-day rupturing of relationship — the casual 'small' sins, the thoughtless 'big' sins and the mass of omissions. To effect reconciliation, we must free the Spirit within us. The obstacle is never God — nor the world's men and women — it is **myself**. It is a strange and disturbing fact that the more I focus on myself, the more divided I am inside. The more selfish I am, the less of an integrated person I am. I become authentically a person, a self to the extent I am **for others**.

To be at peace within, to reconcile the conflicting forces inside of me, I must deaden this stress on myself — on **my needs** and **my wants**, on my self-fulfillment and what is meaningful to me. I must let the Spirit lead me where He will. The Spirit will lead me outside myself, lead me to "the others," those who are less human because I am less Christian: to the child of six who has never heard a word of love, to the lonely people whom everyone shuns, to those who hate me because I seem to have so much, to those who pity me because I seem to live so little, to all those in search of something to live for, those in sorrow over life that has died. These "others" are legion, but only through them will I escape that small self in whose womb so much sinfulness comes to birth.

## Can World Get Along Without God?

By Religious News Service

A decade after the beginning of the death-of-God controversy there is much less confidence about human ability to get on in the universe without divinity.

After being eclipsed by a variety of secular theology and religious fads, serious discussion about God is gaining renewed prominence. Some of the theologians identified with "God is dead" thought are deeply involved in that discussion, as are certain social scientists whose fields of inquiry have not traditionally made room for God-talk.

Much theology in the early 1960s, Dr. Paul Van Buren of Temple University recently said, was concerned with the issue, "How can we make sense out of God?"

Such efforts, he added, assumed that people "know what makes good sense."

When anything is hard to understand, one human response is to deny its importance. Therefore, in attempts to make sense of God, for people who assume they know what makes sense, a possibility is to ignore God. That was a particularly attractive option in the booster secularism of the early 1960s.

Science and theories of human progress hold that people are autonomous, able to take care of themselves and plan for the future without recourse to transcendent reality. Why not a theology with no God?

Dr. Van Buren, who was associated with the death-of-God movement, although he never adopted the phrase "God is dead," now feels the enterprise of trying to make sense of God was off center.

"If we can't understand 'God' that is our problem," he said. "We have to be willing to talk about God as something we don't understand."

In 1963, Dr. Van Buren had wondered how a Christian who is a secular person can "understand his faith in a secular way?" His conclusion then was that secular culture had emptied the term "God" of any meaning, so theology would have to proceed with no God.

The theologian wrote in a late May issue of *The Christian Century* that theology must try to speak of the "radically transcendent" or should "pack its bags and go home."

When reports on the death-of-God began to appear in the press in 1965, there were loud

outcries against the movement — which never involved more than five or six theologians — from ecclesiastical leaders and more conservative theologians.

Some persons today, including Dr. Van Buren, feel that "God is dead" was to a great extent a journalistic phenomenon. They can rightly point out that the phrase "death-of-God" had entered formal theological discussions as early as 1960, and in 1961 a book called "The Death of God" was authored by Gabriel Vahanan.

While assertions that "God is dead" won few adherents, the public controversy may have had positive results. Dr. Langdon Gilkey of Chicago and Dr. Thomas Ogletree of Nashville, both widely respected theologians, were among those who felt that the death-of-God movement might help clarify and direct thought about the doctrine of God.

Father Thomas Gilbride of Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans, shared that view. He said that no matter how much one might disagree with the conclusions of death-of-God exponents "they are dealing with a real problem. To the minds of many contemporary people God is unreal and Christianity appears worn out."

In theology, the radicals posed the question of human autonomy. That they were rejected in a world which is admittedly and increasingly secular testified to the quest of men and women to find a transcendent dimension.

It is perhaps not happenstance that the "Jesus People" fascination with occultism and a neo-Pentecostal awakening came in the U.S. on the heels of the epitomy of secularity: claims that God had died.

To seek a faith that points beyond human finitude, or animal existence, is one of the most universal traits, according to the late Dr. Ernest Becker, whose book "The Denial of Death" won the 1974 Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction.

Dr. Becker argues that the fear of death is the strongest psychological motivation in human life. He agrees with Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th Century Danish theologian, that people are caught up in a paradox of being animals who know they will die. To deal with the tension caused by such self-awareness, Dr. Becker, who was a social anthropologist, finds it entirely fitting that people should rely on a God-figure.

The posthumous winner of the Pulitzer Prize had no patience with "psychoanalytical religionists" who claim human life can be completely unrepressed and endlessly joyous. People, he declared, are not autonomous, either as individuals or in groups. They are directed to a transcendent power.

Dr. Becker contended that the best of modern social science — psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. — and religion are not at odds, because both know that human nature is limited.

Recognition that people are not gods, and may not know what makes sense, gives rise to contemplation of God. It is exactly an awareness of distinction between human creatureliness and divine stability that stands at the heart of religion.

What theology should do today, Dr. Van Buren said in his *Century* article, is return to the work of serving God.

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord," he quoted from the Apostle Paul. "This is the light in which the utter darkness of our situation becomes known, and known as a situation about which darkness is not the last word."

Conservative Churches with traditional theologies are today growing faster than groups with liberal ideas but the pool of persons from which any church draws members is shrinking. A recent ecumenical survey indicated that half of the U.S. population is "unchurched."

And a study of a cross section of the nation's college and non-college students showed that only 28 per cent of the students and 42 per cent of the working youths consider religion very important.

If Dr. Becker is right in his analysis of the human condition, the search for "ultimate power" will not vanish from the race. Once persons are genuinely confronted by their finitude, he maintains, they are on the "brink of oblivion — which is at the same time the brink of infinity."

Only two options are open, according to Kierkegaard, Dr. Becker's mentor: a leap of faith or hopeless anxiety. The leap leaves people vulnerable but open "to the very service of God," connected with "the invisible mystery at the heart of creation."