

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## Thoughts from Assisi

Twelve years ago on Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis, the late beloved Pope John XXIII led a pilgrimage to Assisi and in his homily at the altar above the tomb of the great saint, he remarked: "Here, with St. Francis, we are really at the gates of Heaven. Why did God give this holy city of Assisi this enchantment of nature, this charm of holiness which appears to be suspended in the air and which the pilgrim seems to perceive quite sensibly? The answer is easy. So that men through a common and universal language, may learn to recognize their Creator and to acknowledge themselves as brothers one to another."



During my seminary days, I joined the Third Order of St. Francis and have had for many years a special devotion to the Saint. Quite naturally, then, I was pleased to know that the last five days of our Theological Consultation would be spent in the beautiful city of the Umbrian valley nestled on the slopes of Mt. Subasio.

To the traveller heading north from Rome, Assisi might appear little different from other lovely towns and cities picturesquely arranged on terraced hills, and so rich in monuments that evidence a full history of days of violence and days of peace. But there is something unique about Assisi, a spiritual beauty that the visitor can sense as Pope John did — for the spirit of St. Francis has never left her.

We stayed in an ancient friary called the Sacro Convento, built in 1230, attached to the three-level basilica built at the same time, had our meals together in the monastery refectory and slept in quarters that have been recently modernized and proved quite comfortable — with windows overlooking the breathtaking landscape of a vast fertile valley of olive groves and vineyards embraced by the mountains of Spoleto.

Masses in Assisi were offered at the tomb of St. Francis — again at the tomb of St. Clare who was received by St. Francis in 1212 to begin a life of sacrifice and poverty (foundress of the Poor Clares, beggars for Christ) — and on the final day at the Portiuncula Chapel set in the center of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels. This Chapel was given to St. Francis by the Benedictines in 1211. It was his favorite center for prayer and here he gathered his disciples into a community of men dedicated to poverty. This shrine has been rightly called the birthplace of the Franciscan Orders.

Our study program was concluded at the Convento with lectures in Moral Theology by Fathers Bernard Haring and Sean O'Riordan of the Redemptorist Order. In a prayerful spirit we evaluated the month-long program. While many expressed disagreement with opinions expressed by some of the lecturers, all agreed that the month had been rich in many blessings, especially the fraternity and community spirit that had developed among the bishops and the opportunity given to us to know personally, great scholars as men of deep faith, thoroughly dedicated to the Church and loyal sons fully aware of their personal responsibility to assist her Magisterium.

There is more to Assisi than monuments which speak of the 13th Century and the days of Francis. There is a new Assisi much alive to the needs of people of the XX Century. One evening we went to the Citadella, the Center of Catholic Action founded in 1939 by Don Giovanni Rossi, known as the Pro Civitate Christiana Association. Here we met dedicated lay missionaries from all parts of the world who were giving their lives to the spreading of Christian ideals in our society. In the auditorium of the complex we were entertained by an American troupe of excellent voices presenting a concert of Negro spirituals. The night before in the same auditorium, I saw a fine performance of Godspell done in English (Italian text provided for the benefit of the audience) by another American group who had been touring the Umbrian valley as part of a program for cultural enrichment.

Housed at the Convento with us were hundreds of young boys and girls who were being given a week's exercise in Christian living. It reminded me of our Teen Seminar program at home. This Ragazzi Nuovi movement seems to be catching on all over Italy. It was a delight to witness their daily liturgy, to see them so much at ease in the company of their priests and Sisters and adult laity who were directing the program of study, prayer, and Christian witness. They moved about the town singing and preaching to all who would listen. I am sure Francis was smiling on them.

And so we come to journey's end. Thanks for taking the time to read my diary. I thank God for the blessings of these days of pilgrimage and for the gracious and helpful companionship of Monsignor Richard Burns.

## vatican news

## Role of the Laity in the Church

In the course of the General Audience Oct. 2 the Holy Father delivered the following address on the commitment of laymen in the Church.

Every Wednesday audience is for us an ever new joy, an ever appreciated consolation. Today, the presence of the members of the Council of the Laity invites us to give this meeting a particular tone and language: in a way we are addressing all laymen in the Church. You are indeed the People of God that the Apostle John saw climbing towards the heavenly Jerusalem, of all races, all nations, all languages! We greet one and all with the same affection. We should congratulate especially the Members of the Council of the Laity who chose, this year, to be received at the same time as participants in the general audience. That is an exemplary sign of their desire to be near and serve all the baptized.

Is it necessary to recall to all those present this morning that the Council of the Laity is the organism we set up on 6 Jan. 1967, in order to promote and coordinate the universal Church, with the concern to listen to the voice of other laymen and the voice of the pastors of the Church? In this context, and without setting aside the work of the Synod which has just opened, it seemed to us very opportune to talk to you about two fundamental aspects of the lay apostolate, which are becoming more or less blurred in the minds of Christians today: the importance of personal witness, and the unity of the different witnesses of the Gospel among themselves and with their Bishops.

Contemporary man listens

more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, or if he listens to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. He feels, in fact, an instinctive revulsion for everything that appears as mystification, facade, compromise. In this context the importance of a life that really echoes the Gospel, is understandable!

The reasons for this attraction of the present-day world to the real witness of Christ could be reduced to four. Modern man, engaged in the conquest and utilization of matter, feels a hunger for something else, a strange loneliness. The Christian dedicated to Jesus Christ knows another mystery more unfathomable than matter: the mystery of God who invites man to a sharing of life in an endless communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Mystery of transcendence and proximity! Actually, twentieth-century man aspires to this fullness of personal dialogue that matter denies him. Witnesses of the invisible are more necessary than ever today.

Men of the present time are frail beings easily subject to insecurity, fear and anguish. How many wonder if they are accepted by those around them! Our human brothers need to meet other brothers radiant with serenity, joy, hope and charity, in spite of the hardships and contradictions that overtake them also. To be a witness to God's power operating in human frailty, astonishing and always rising again, is not to alienate man, but to propose to him ways to freedom.

The rising generations are specially thirst for sincerity, truth and authenticity. They

abhor pharisaism in all its forms. It is understandable, therefore, that they are attached to the witness of lives fully committed to the service of Christ. They go all over the world to find disciples of the Gospel, guileless before God and men, and have remained young with the youth of divine grace. The young generations would like to meet more witnesses of the Absolute. The world awaits the march-past of the saints.

Modern man also raises, and often painfully, the problem of the meaning of human life. What is the reason for freedom, work, suffering, death, the presence of others? Now in the darkness he who is trying to live the Gospel appears as the one who has found a meaning, a completion of his life, far away from oppressive anthropocentric systems.

This personal witness must be borne by every baptized, every confirmed person, layman, religious or priest. But laymen are invited to live it in a particular way, in the midst of the world, working according to their faith in the temporal affairs of their families, their city, the international world, in order to build with all men, believers or unbelievers, a world more worthy of God's sons. It is by working with others that they often discover all the dimensions of the apostolate. They will take care not to forget that they are also called to encourage among their brothers a direct meeting with Jesus Christ. Their witness is not silent witness.

We are well aware of everything laymen have done for the Church of Christ in past centuries and since the vigorous appeals of the Popes in favor of

Catholic Action. Nevertheless, in spite of the appearance and development of new forms of apostolate and the use of increasingly more precise techniques, the testimony of the Gospel does not stand out as it should do on the contemporary scene. Now the Church would make the Gospel sterile and would make herself sterile if she proclaimed merely an abstract ideal, however well presented it might be, without laymen putting this ideal into concrete practice, like leaven buried in the dough. We hope that our convictions on this fundamental point of personal witness will echo loudly in your hearts.

But it has become a necessity, and it is the fortune of our times, to seek also a collective testimony of Christians, adapted to age, neighborhood, social and professional environments, in short to the multiple realities of life. This gives rise to numerous movements which support the apostolate of their members, thanks to exchanges, to a common revision of life and to aims matured and attained together. What is more, these movements have taken on, more recently, the universal note that becomes the Catholic Church and meets the needs of an increasingly unified world: they have become international. Our Council of the Laity is tuning in to all this personal and community vitality.

In the Church, this immense body of Christ, gifts and needs are very varied, and the trends of the apostolate very different. There must, however, be a unity of inspiration and a convergence of purpose. This is not only

necessary for the efficiency of the apostolate; it is a criterion of its authenticity: Christ prayed that his disciples might be one. All these movements must, therefore, show a clear desire to meet, to cooperate on fundamental aims, to pray together, to celebrate the Eucharist together, and to make their own the major orientations of the Church, in this period of the implementation of the II Vatican Council. At the level of the Holy See, which is that of the universal Church, the Council of the Laity is a privileged place of this confrontation and collaboration. And the Holy Year must be a providential hour to carry out, at all levels, this necessary rapprochement and to live this communion.

The apostolate of the baptized will have this authenticity and this unity if it is carried out in communion with the responsible Pastors of the People of God, whatever may be the diversity of opinions about the way of cooperating with the hierarchy. The famous words of St. Ignatius of Antioch, about the celebration of the Eucharist, come to mind: "Nothing apart from the Bishop." We know how our Brothers in the episcopate are trying to exercise the authority that has been entrusted to them: in the desire to serve! We know too how many Christian laymen there are who give their Bishops exemplary testimonies of trust, loyalty, support and cooperation. At this very moment, over 200 Bishops are gathered for the fourth Synod of our Pontificate. If they were here, it seems to us they would say to you, in all sincerity, repeating St. Augustine's words: "Brothers, with you I am a Christian, for you I am a bishop."