

# Ancient Books Give Key to Official Heresy

By John Dash

In the beginning there was a problem.

That problem persists today.

And Elaine Pagels, the prize-winning author and theologian who heads the religion department of Barnard College at Columbia University, is in the thick of it.

Mrs. Pagels delivered the University of Rochester's Beaven Lecture last week on the conflicts between those early Christians who considered themselves gifted with special revelation and those who developed the hierarchical form of Church which we know today.

It has only been in recent years that scholars have been able to ferret out the controversy by reading the texts of Gnostics, that group of Christians who held that, among other things, self-knowledge is the key to salvation, that Jesus did not necessarily rise physically from the dead, and that Jesus imparted special knowledge to a select few of his disciples.

Heretofore, scholars had to rely for the most part on the caricature of gnostic teachings presented by the early Fathers of the Church in polemic writings against them.

Around the time of the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, there was also found, in Egypt, a collection of ancient Coptic books, the Nag Hammadi Library, which is a collection

of gnostic "gospels" and other writings.

It is that find that is helping scholars more clearly understand the early development of Christianity.

Mrs. Pagels said that she hoped her lecture would convey her excitement over the Nag Hammadi find.

In that collection is a book called the Secret Gospel of "Judas Thomas, the Twin of Jesus." Though the book found in Egypt was copied around 350 A.D., Mrs. Pagels said, it is actually a translation from an even earlier text which may even predate the earliest texts of what we now know as the New Testament.

Up until now, scholars have only known about the book by references to it in other works, principally the writings of St. Irenaeus who inveighed against the gnostic Christians.

It is through this gospel that scholars are now able to accurately define what ultimately became heresy and orthodoxy in the early Church.

According to Mrs. Pagels, the points of departure are several. Among them:

Gnostics held that Jesus' resurrection should be viewed as symbolic of a spiritual awakening achieved through understanding of one's self, while the orthodox stressed that Jesus physically rose from the dead;

Gnostics taught a virgin birth, but one of a feminine

Holy Spirit, while the orthodox held to the physical virgin birth;

Gnostics described God in both masculine and feminine terms, while the orthodox by and large held to describing God in masculine terms.

In addition, the Kingdom of God, in orthodox description, was an imminently expected physical reality, while for the gnostics, "the Kingdom of God was neither temporal nor physical but a state of self-discovery, a symbol for a state

of transformed consciousness."

After outlining a number of such divergences, Mrs. Pagels asked her audience, "Now what's so terrible? Why was it called the 'most despicable heresy'?"

Why did St. Irenaeus launch so violent an attack on gnostic teaching — why was it considered so dangerous, she asked.

"I suspect that the reason was political," she said.

By the end of the second century, she said, the structure of the Church had evolved into one with a hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, orthodox creed and sacraments, and a canon of texts, the New Testament.

Gnostic doctrine was opposed to such a process, she said.

Gnostic writings point to the individual, the orthodox canon of the New Testament points to the structure.

Early Christianity, she said, "had to have a structure or else the movement could have died out."

In addition, she observed, the early Christian Church was under terrible persecution and it was necessary to establish a structure that would carry moral weight against such persecution.

Gnosticism, she said, by its very nature, could not rise to that challenge and was inimical to meeting that very human need.

## Sister Mary Claude Loeb, RSM



Viewpoint: Sisters Reflect

### Respect The Plight Of the Poor

Although spoken several months ago, the affirmations and proclamations voiced by many at prayer services in memory of the four U.S. women martyred in El Salvador still ring in my mind and heart.

Standing at one of these services, guilty of the gospel, I, too, expressed a determination to live it — and was sentenced to go forth and proclaim, in our own land, the belief that all are equally precious in God's sight and have an equal right to share the earth.

The earth — the dirt — has significance in this part of our country where large forests, grazing lands and fields for crops have required that some people live tucked in woods or occasionally clustered together on poorly disguised marshland.

Having lived in the South for a relatively short time, the complexity of its culture and subcultures continues to unfold for me. As I enter more fully into the life and community of those I serve in rural ministry, I am often in awe of their efforts to cope with social and economic problems with little support beyond their personal strength and resourcefulness.

Eighty-five to 95 percent of the residents in depressed areas are black Americans. Many families live on incomes 40 percent below the poverty level. Some with little or no fixed incomes, who need help most, are often blocked or turned back at every step taken to secure that assistance. Significant numbers, still affected by the experience of their elders in the 60s and early 70s, are hesitant to register to vote.

In rural areas, problems in obtaining health and welfare services are compounded by distance. Social welfare offices are staffed, but outreach visits rare. Social Security satellites are often located 20-30 miles away and appointments at main offices require travelling at least 55 miles one way.

Federal subsidies and grants to the health care system, which have made possible more comprehensive and adequate services to more people and have resulted in making visible many more needing services of specialists, are very probably in jeopardy. In general, dental health is

poor and preventive care for adults totally lacking.

Local governments in small towns are often not equipped to make adequate plans, secure sufficient funds, or implement programs for community development.

Rural ministry in this setting means challenge and risk. It means political concern as well as social action. It is a setting in which we are the Catholic Church — by our presence, being, simple activity and the naming of ourselves.

Working outside the system has drawbacks as well as advantages. There is more freedom to move in outreach and action without the constraints of institutions and red tape. But when entrance into the system is required, barriers to access are often encountered.

During times of personal reflection, a stream of questions flows:

- What does Social Justice mean?
- How poor do the poor have to be to have their plight respected?
- What about "quality of life" in our land of plenty?
- Was the old way better?
- Should small towns be allowed to die?
- Is it foolish, even facetious for us to encourage people to voice their needs with self-assurance, to call for full information about matters which affect them and to insist that they be taken seriously as contributors in planning and decision-making which involve the development of their towns and the bettering on their lives?

These are hard questions, requiring some answers daily. I pray that our answers will be truly guided by the Spirit. For me, I know that two beliefs are operative: one appropriated from NAWR that I "cannot escape responsibility for my personal role in history if it contributes to the oppression of the poor and helpless;" and the other a personal conviction that I have no business being here if I merely perpetuate the status quo.

Sister Mary Claude Loeb, RSM, works in rural ministry in Southwest Alabama.

## Sarah Child



All in the Family

### The Violence Of Cross Still Hurts

It is the next to last religious ed class and the 13 third graders in the class my daughter and I teach are as rambunctious as only spring-fevered eight-year-olds can be.

We say our communal prayers and then each is asked to think of one particular thing to thank the Lord for on this particular afternoon. The sun is shining and the temperatures pleasant and most of the thank-yous deal with the nice weather.

Jeff finishes up the prayers. "Thank you Jesus for this being the next to last class." A round of titters circles the room. I murmur a fervent amen and go to the blackboard and ask them to list some of the names which have cropped up in our studies this year.

They mention Jesus, then Thomas and Peter and Judas and Mary Magdalene and then somebody says "Saul" and somebody else says "Paul."

It is their favorite story and without being asked one of the boys quickly recounts it. Saul threw stones at

Stephen and God struck him down with lightning and blinded him and Saul decided he wanted to help God and he changed his name to Paul.

My daughter and I exchange a grin. From experience we know that the incident is remembered not because of our teaching skill but because thunder and violence is what rivets them.

Two weeks before we have taken them to the church to say the stations of the cross and they have been transfixed by the carvings, sucking in their breath and commenting on the terrible treatment dealt to Jesus.

Now we talk again about what happened on Good Friday and they dwell in detail on the crowning of thorns, the nails that pierced his wrists and feet, the hole in his side.

"They whipped him, you know," says one girl, her eyes big in her face, "and made him carry the heavy cross."

"But it's the nails that were bad, real bad," says Nicky. He screws up his face, his eyes wide. "I can't stand thinking about it," he says.

And neither can we, Nicky. Neither can we.

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