

A disturbing encounter of the Christian kind

By David Gibson
NC News Service

It was late on a Friday afternoon. After a long week at work, the young man wanted to waste no time getting home. He hurried along the busy, downtown sidewalk.

As he approached a busy corner, he noticed an old man in a wheelchair. The man in the wheelchair was in an animated discussion with a cab driver.

Obviously the old man and the cab driver were trying to resolve something. Whatever it was, the young man hoped to pass the situation by without getting involved.

The flame of that hope flickered, however, when the old man called out to the young man. "Help lift me into this cab," the old man said in a tone that was more a command than a request.

The young man stopped in his tracks. The man in the wheelchair was frail looking, even sickly, and not altogether clean. The young man didn't much feel like stopping to help.

"What's wrong?" the young man asked.

"I need help to get into the cab," the old man replied. "The cab driver has a bad back and says he can't lift me."

Suddenly the young man said he felt impelled to help, though to tell the truth he found the situation uninviting. Furthermore he had some doubts about the sufficiency of his own strength to manage the awkward maneuvers required to get the old man from the wheelchair to the cab.

The young man was very uncomfortable with the situation.

Then, as if to increase his discomfort, the young man saw that one leg of the old man's trousers was all wet.

But finally the maneuvering was completed, the old man was in the cab, the wheelchair was in the trunk of the cab, and everyone went their separate ways. The young man proceeded toward home, walking a bit slower now, disturbed by this streetcorner encounter.

That story, the young man said, is what first comes to mind for him when he thinks of the law of Christianity.

The man, a Catholic, said that while the incident with the man in the wheelchair was occurring, the gospel account about seeing Christ in those who need one's help clearly came into his mind:



"Suddenly the young man said he felt impelled to help, though to tell the truth he found the situation uninviting."

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me."

It was when the gospel account occurred to him that the young man said he felt impelled to aid the man in the wheelchair. It was as though the gospel account summed up something central and important in Christianity. "I said to myself, 'This is what Christians must do,'" the young man explained.

Did the young man act out of love? Did he act out of obligation? Or was it out of fear or guilt?

He said the answers to those questions were not altogether clear to him in this incident.

Afterward it bothered the young man that he didn't feel better about helping the old man. Telling the story during a parish

renewal group meeting, the young man said the situation puzzled him, for he had left it more with a sense of brooding than of exhilaration at having recognized Christ in the old man.

What's more, it wasn't a situation the young man hoped would repeat itself soon. He wondered if he should feel badly about that. If he had been asked to select a way to serve human needs that particular Friday afternoon, he said he would have selected another way.

As the man concluded his brief story, he said he felt he had learned something from his encounter with the old man. He had discovered that Christianity asks much of its people.

"Christianity isn't the easy way out," he commented.

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)

The new code:

By Jerry Filteau
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The history of the past 20 years since Vatican Council II provides the background to understanding a major event that has just occurred in the life of the Catholic Church: the introduction last year of a new Code of Canon Law, the general law governing Catholics.

The significance of the new code can be seen only if one looks at it in relation to the council. When Pope John XXIII announced in 1958 that he was calling a general council of all the world's bishops, in the same speech he announced that he was forming a commission to revise the church's existing Code of Canon Law.

The council and the code were the two major parts of Pope John's one decision to take steps to renew the church. That is why Pope John Paul II could refer to the new code recently as the final council document.

The process of reforming the code was delayed until the council was completed because Pope John's successor, Pope Paul VI, saw that the council's reforms and the spirit behind them would

Law and salva

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

Law. Gospel. How are they related?

The question gave the first Christians no end of trouble. There is hardly a book in the New Testament which does not grapple with the question in one way or another.

All the first Christians had been devout Jews or were converts to communities with a strong Jewish background. For them, the law of Moses was the law of God. Becoming Christians could not change that. Or could it?

It did change their attitude toward the law.

The early Christians wanted to know the function of the law. Was one saved by observing the law, or was an even more fundamental law at work?

St. Paul was the first to face the problem. He had come to know Christ, not through observance of the law but in spite of it. In fact, his zeal for the law formerly had led him to persecute the followers of Jesus.

Now he concluded: "The justice I possess is that which comes through-faith in Christ. It