

Philosophers all

plementary ways, they are "running" toward God.

Philosophy has a long, glorious history. As soon as men and women began to reflect on their place in the universe they began to philosophize. In ancient Greece in the sixth century B.C., Pythagoras began to call himself a "philosopher."

The word "philosopher" was derived from two Greek words: "philo" which means love and "sophia" which means wisdom. So a philosopher is a lover of wisdom.

But loving wisdom doesn't mean we have all the answers to difficult questions. On the contrary, it really is the height of wisdom to recognize the limitations of our human power to reason and observe the world.

In fact, this is why Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, was described by the Delphic oracle as "the wisest man alive." Socrates admitted that he knew very little.

There have been many great philosophers in the Christian tradition. Sts. Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas may be the most famous. Other Catholic philosophers include Hildegard of Bingen, Pascal, Jacques Maritain, Edith Stein and Pope John Paul II.

What makes many Christian philosophers different from other philosophers? For one thing, they attempt to develop a complemen-

tary relationship between their power to reason and their faith. Many other philosophers restrict themselves simply to what can be known by reason.

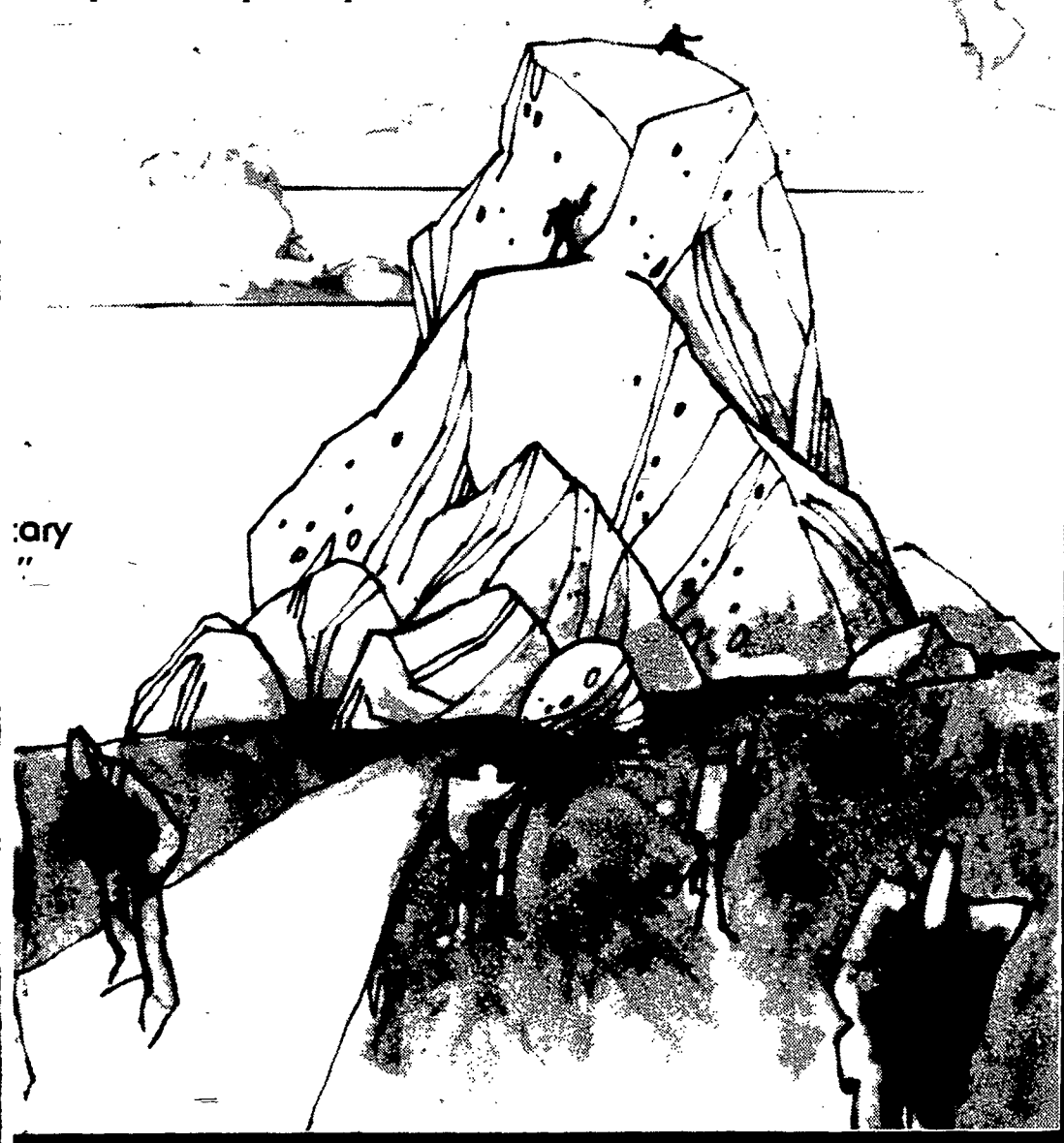
St. Thomas Aquinas believed that since God created the world, a person could discover many truths about God by carefully studying basic principles in nature. He called this activity philosophizing through the "natural light of reason."

Today this exercise of reason is just as important as it was in the 13th century when Thomas Aquinas described philosophy as the "handmaid of theology."

For at times when personal faith is experienced as a struggle in darkness, a Christian philosophy of life can give people the stability needed to keep growing.

At other times, the power of human reason can help us discover a truth that leads into a fuller experience of God.

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FOOD...

...for thought

and the ways to find happiness.

It is not surprising that a thoughtful person locked in a prison cell would spend time pondering the meaning of things. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis during World War II, was such a person. From the writing done in his cell, the world eventually would be exposed to his quest.

In one prison poem, Bonhoeffer asked: "Who am I...Am I really that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I myself know of myself?...Who am I? This or the Other? Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another? Am I both at once?"

Who wouldn't like to answer the question "Who am I?" But do you think the effort to do so, which does not yield a product, which does not have a definite point of conclusion and which raises questions which cannot be answered succinctly, has real value?

The human person is always in the process of coming to terms with what he or she is and can be. In an age of outer-space exploration there is an inner space that also represents a "new frontier." Isn't it also in need of exploration?

At what points do you become a sort of philosopher? What does this mean for you as a Christian?

A college philosophy professor announced on the first day of class that it would be his main goal during the semester to help students learn to think.

To think? A few students — maybe most of them — believed thinking was on a par with breathing, something they instinctively knew how to do. Was there a need to devote an entire semester to fine-tuning their thinking skills?

A few students might have quit the course after its first day, except that at the time this was a required class in a Catholic college where philosophy long had been considered an invaluable companion for the person of faith.

The class proved well-worth its tuition cost. And it was fun at times, as the professor guided students into an examination of their own thought processes and their potential to become true inquirers into the human adventure.

Still, there was a sense in which the students' suspicions on the first day of class had been on target. Thinking is a natural element of human living.

What's more, over the course of a lifetime almost anyone can expect to run up against the questions professional philosophers ask, driven by events to inquire about the reasons to live and the meaning of death, the purpose of freedom

...for discussion

1. Do you think there is a sense in which you are a philosopher? Why?

2. What kinds of problems does Father John Castelot say the ancient Hebrew philosopher touched? If he were living today, what kinds of problems do you think Sirach would give his attention to?

3. David Gibson's article suggests that the human mind and its powers have been seen as both delightful and perplexing. Why? And what is your view on the powers of the human mind?

4. What are some ways the armchair philosopher can contribute to the life of a faith community — a parish, for example?

SECOND HELPINGS

Catholic thinkers from St. Augustine to Jesuit Father Karl Rahner are the focus of "Catholic Thinkers in the Clear," by William A. Herr. The work of the 20th-century's Jesuit Father John Courtney Murray is discussed, as is that of the 13-century St. Thomas Aquinas — thinkers who posed central questions about God and life's meaning. St. Teresa of Avila "addressed herself particularly to those whose minds...run from one thing to another uncontrollably, like wild horses," the author explains. The modern French thinker, Gabriel Marcel, was programmed from early childhood to withdraw into abstractions. He did that until "reality...forced his attention back to the facts of everyday life." This book includes 20 easy-to-read chapters. (Thomas More Association, 223 W. Erie St., Chicago, Ill. 60610. \$15.95.)