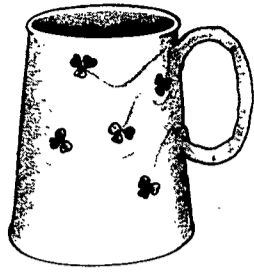


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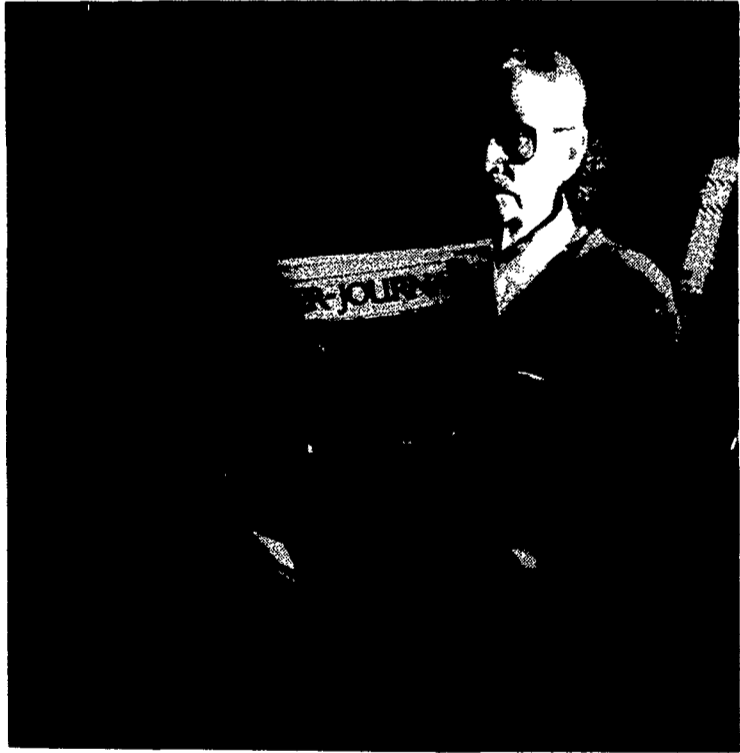


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Lord, what would you have me do?

By Cindy Bassett

After the coming of the Holy Spirit, the new Church grew rapidly. Peter traveled to many towns throughout the region to teach these new followers. "You must pray always," he told them, "and allow the Spirit to guide you in all things."

One day, in Lydda, just after Peter had finished preaching, two men came rushing up to him. "Please come back with us to Joppa," they said. "The whole town is grieving over the sudden death of Tabitha. She was a godly woman who believed in Jesus and did much to help the poor among us."

"What would you have me do?" Peter asked them.

"Everyone in Joppa knows that you were one of Jesus' apostles," one of them replied. "Your presence with the mourners will be a great comfort to these new members of the Church."

Peter was silent as he walked along with his two companions. For the entire journey, he prayed, "Lord, what would you have me do?"

As they approached Joppa, Peter recalled another time when he had gone with Jesus to the house of Jairus, whose daughter was ill. But before they arrived, messengers had come to meet them, saying: "Jairus, your daughter is dead. There is no need to trouble Jesus any further."

Even so, Jesus continued onward. "Don't be afraid," he told Jairus. "Just trust me." On that day, Peter saw Jesus restore Jairus' daughter to life.

As Peter and his companions neared Tabitha's house, they noticed a large crowd of mourners gathered there. The dead woman had been a skilled seamstress, and many of the widows were wearing garments she had fash-

The Bible Corner

ioned for them.

"Where is the body of Tabitha?" Peter asked as he entered the house.

Some of the mourners brought Peter to a room upstairs. "Please leave me alone," he said.

Peter knelt down, and again he prayed, "Lord, what would you have me do?"

Suddenly, he remembered Jesus' words to all of his apostles before he had left them: "Anyone believing in me shall do the same miracles I have done, and even greater ones, because I am going to be with the Father."

This time Peter prayed, "Lord I ask for your Name." Then he turned to the woman's body and said aloud, "Tabitha, get up!"

Immediately, the woman's eyes opened. Peter helped Tabitha up, and presented her to everyone gathered downstairs.

"Not by my own power has Tabitha been restored to you," Peter told them, "but in the Name of Jesus. Praise God!"

News of this great miracle spread throughout the region, and many more were added to those who already believed in Jesus.

Scripture Reference: Mark 5:38-42; John 14:12-14; Acts 9:36-42.

Meditation: Lord, please help our hearts to be open to the Spirit so that we can bring glory to your Name.

Theology: poetry or prose

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Political observers often contrast the "poetry" of campaigning with the "prose" of governing.

Candidates try to offer the electorate a vision — an exercise in political poetry. Public officials have to translate vision into specific programs — an exercise in political prose.

A similar dynamic is at work in the Church. Theology is an exercise in religious poetry. It sketches a grand vision of God's loving plan for us in the history of salvation and of our response to God's love.

Pastoral practice, by contrast, is an exercise in religious prose. It translates theological vision into ministries, programs, policies, rituals and laws.

Although theology and pastoral practice are intimately related, they remain distinct in the life of the Church. Unfortunately, not everyone understands that. For some, the poetic is everywhere reduced to the prosaic. They think that theology, like canon law, is quantifiable: "So-and-so has the power to do such-and-such under the following five conditions — subject, however, to these three limitations."

Theology isn't supposed to work that way. Because theology is a poetic, not a prosaic enterprise, it engages the imagination as well as the intellect. Unlike law, theology is not concerned primarily with the will. Theological questions are questions about meaning, not about duty.

Those who miss the poetic nature of theology tend to put the cart before the horse. For them, something is true or good because it is commanded. For theology, something is commanded only because it is first perceived to be true or good.

St. Anselm reminded us some 900 years ago that theology is "faith seeking understanding."

"Understanding" of what, or of whom? Of God?

But since no one has ever seen God (John 1:18), everything we say or write about God will always fall short of the mark. Accordingly, one speaks and writes of God in the same way that one speaks and writes of love, of truth, of beauty, and of goodness — tentatively, modestly, analogically.

The language of theology, therefore, is far removed from the language of rules and laws. Theology invites understanding, not obedience. One needs only to ponder that point for a moment to see how crucial it is.

What are the great theological questions, after all?

Questions about papal authority? Questions about infallibility? Questions about assent and

Essays in Theology

dissent?

Certainly not.

The great questions of theology are about God, about grace, about redemption, about salvation, about the Kingdom, about eternal life, about love, about forgiveness, about hope. Who can quantify such realities? Who can codify them? Who can encase them in fixed formulae?

Has any of us ever seen grace? Has any of us touched redemption? Has any of us photographed the Kingdom? Has any of us measured love, or forgiveness, or hope?

When we speak about such realities as these, we can only do so gropingly, incompletely, and tentatively.

Laws and regulations, by contrast, are written in clear, precise, and concrete prose. I'm not suggesting here that prose is bad, and poetry is good. I'm insisting only that they are different, and that each is essential to the Church.

To reduce everything to the poetic would leave the Church unable to act effectively in the world. But to reduce everything to the prosaic would leave the Church unable to understand why it acts at all.

Under present circumstances, it would seem that the latter is the more immediate risk. The tendency of some members of the Church today is to reduce everything to the prosaic, including theology.

But theology is about God, not about the hierarchy. Theology is about grace, not about laws. Theology is about eternal life, not about rules.

Which is not to say that hierarchy, laws and rules are unimportant. On the contrary, these, too, are necessary to the life and mission of the Church. But without the poetry of theology, the Church can only maintain its unity by coercion and control rather than by conviction and consent.

"The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power" (Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, No. 1).

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