

Book examines complex issues spurred by Vatican II

What Are the Theologians Saying NOW?: A Retrospective on Several Decades, by Monika K. Hellwig; Christian Classics (Westminster, Md., 1992); xvii, 170 pages; \$10.95.

By Monsignor William H. Shannon
Guest contributor

The Second Vatican Council brought sweeping changes into the Roman Catholic Church's life. Changes that heretofore would have taken centuries have occurred on a huge scale in the space of a few years.

So quick a transformation of church life and teaching was bound to raise many new questions. Some people had the leisure, background and guidance to read extensively and to be able to fit these changes into the wider context of the church's long history.

But most Catholics were not so fortunate. The inevitable result was that so much change occurring so rapidly created confusion in the minds of many who were devoted to their Catholic faith and who had always taken for granted the changelessness of church teachings and practices.

This confusion generated many questions. Why have these changes ta-

ken place? What is stable and enduring in the church's life? How does one distinguish what is human and what is divine in the church? To what extent are the church's structures divinely ordained and to what extent are they human developments taking place in the course of time?

What is the local church's relationship to the Church of Rome? Does the local church's bishop act on divine authority or is he merely a delegate of the pope? What is the difference between the pope and the Holy See?

Now that we have come to see the Eucharist, the central experience of our ecclesial life, as the action of a community rather than an isolated experience of myself and Jesus, in what ways does that Eucharist become a symbol of our commitment as church to social justice?

What is sin? Does it simply mean culpability for individual transgressions of God's law or does sin likewise have a societal character that makes us responsible for sinful structures that, though we may not have built, we yet tolerate in our society and in our world?

What does redemption mean? Is it a payment that Jesus makes on our be-

half to an injured God or is it a liberation of individuals and society from standards of living that dehumanize and oppress people, an unmasking of the hidden sinfulness in structures, laws, values and societal expectations that have been uncritically accepted? Can redemption be understood as liberation for both individuals and a society that creates a just and peaceful world and makes people truly free?

Is the Christian vocation one of keeping the commandments, participating in the church's sacramental life, and, as far as possible, staying out of trouble by avoiding the occasions of sin? Or do we find in the New Testament, not a code of behaviour, but a vision that sets high goals and an inspiration that calls us to reach for the heights.

In other words, is the moral teaching presented in the Gospel a series of pre-packaged answers to all moral issues or is it a morality that requires personal moral discernment, creativity and the ability, within the context of the Christian community's life to make decisions of my own and risk my own authenticity in the process?

What is ecumenism's meaning today and how do we relate to other religions, even those that are not Chris-

tian? Is our task just to be missionaries to them or can we enrich our own Christian tradition by contact and dialogue with them?

What does it mean to believe in the Trinity? Does such a belief have any bearing on our daily lives or do we just express our faith in it and then ignore it?

These are serious questions we dare not ignore if we wish to live authentic Christian lives. Monika Hellwig deals with them in a way that is richly informative, offering guidance for further reflection on the reader's part.

One of the themes threading its way throughout Hellwig's book is the necessity of consulting the whole Christian community for an adequate approach to any of these questions. The book's style is remarkably clear and simple in the face of the hugeness of the topics she addresses.

This book is an indispensable help for those involved — whether in family, school, or church — in teaching the young and also for mature, thoughtful adults who live with the questions Hellwig is courageous enough to face in this fine book.

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College of Rochester.

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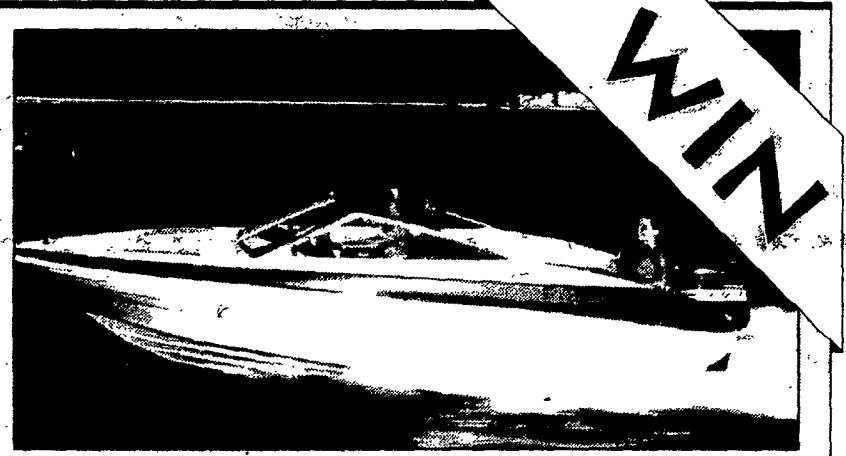
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