It was an ancient rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when night had ended and day was on its way back. "Could it be when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi. "Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No." "Well, then," the students demanded, "when is it?" "It is when you look on the face of any man or woman and see that he or she is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do that, then no matter what time it is, it is still night."

Ruben M. Tanseco, S.J.


A religious reading this book is reminded of Vatican II's Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life. This appropriate renewal is understood to include two simultaneous processes: "a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community, and an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times." (no. 2).

Fr. Arbuckle's three-part study may be regarded as a faithful and inspired spelling out of these processes, but in reverse order: (1) providing an insight into the stages through which religious have passed, or are still passing, in response to the apparent collapse of religious life after Vatican II, (2) identifying the thrust of an in-depth revitalization by means of generating the leadership for refounding religious congregations, and (3) detailing the strategies in planning the formation programs of religious life. In line with the spirit of the same Council, this study is also notable in its consistent deployment of the findings and tools of cultural or social anthropology in clarifying the whys and hows of religious life.

Part One presents a persuasive argument for some who are still wondering, after more than twenty years, about the apparent collapse of religious life (chap. 1). Briefly, the argument is centered on the impact of a rapidly changing world upon the Church, creating cultural disorientation and eventually leading to the break-up of the old-time Catholic ghetto. With the consequent loss of the symbols constituting that ghetto and the absence of viable substitutes, disorientation gives way to confusion, malaise, anger, and the like. But for others who are now ready to pick up the challenge (chap. 2), what is needed is to recover the sense of what it means to preach the Gospel (Evangelization). In religious life this is a move towards refounding religious congregations which can only be done effectively through the use of symbols.
These symbols emerge from the living exchange between the Church and the diverse cultures of the people (Inculturation). At this point, it would seem that Fr. Arbuckle sees the tie-up between Evangelization and Inculturation as involving the same processes corresponding to his three-part study. There is thus, first of all, the need of a vision of the mission of the Church. This vision can only be attained when religious begin to overcome confusion, malaise, and anger; it reaches its climax with a perception of the incongruities of life (chap. 3) which, when applied to one’s own stupidities and sinfulness, should lead to an experience of the love and mercy of God. It is such a kindly contemplation or sense of humor which the author says inspires change-agents to innovate.

When applied to religious life, innovation implies the second part of those processes: the critical evaluation of cultures. The key task of change-agents is indeed seen as the shaping of the culture of religious life so as to provide genuine leadership (chap. 4). Here Fr. Arbuckle draws anew on the resources of the social sciences, highlighting how secular organizations are successfully managed. For instance, the leadership is tasked with gathering around itself the key groups who will lead, not so much by traditionalist authority, but with genuine capacity to inspire other members around central values, including common goals and the means to achieve them. Among those key groups are Provincials who are regarded as "cultural revolutionaries" (chap. 5), ready to use power by identifying those who wish to innovate, placing them in responsible positions, and supporting them whenever they are blocked from so doing. Possessed with a good sense of working with people, they are also sensitive to the felt needs of others and capable of planning with a view to the future. Finally, for leadership planning, sociological surveys can likewise be put to good use as an important tool when these are properly understood and when taken in the wider context of fostering consultative government (chap. 6).

The shift of emphases after Vatican II, such as from the cultic to the pastoral model of formation programs, opens Part Three (chap. 7). Given such a shift, formation programs are argued to call for the availability and training of an adequate number of personnel and the recruitment of a sufficient number of peers in community who would be allowed ample freedom and space in formation. Once again, in proposing the substance of programs for initial formation as in the Novitiate (chap. 8), Fr. Arbuckle suggests surprising parallels for religious life. Before, it was modern corporations; here, it is “tribal communities” which offer some insights. Whether these involve the “stages” of initiation or the culture/community models, they lead to the final part of those processes with which the author began: personal and community conversion in Christ. The process and sequence — that is, an alternation of academic input and evaluated apostolic experience — which are thereby detailed constitute a kind of “faith discernment.” This is also claimed by the

Phillip Berryman (PB) is known as one of the most knowledgeable of U.S. commentators on the Latin American scene, and one who has special expertise in Latin American liberation theology (LT). Two books on Central America and a good number of articles in America, Commonweal, Theological Studies, The National Catholic Reporter, and other journals have preceded this book-length survey of liberation theology as a "revolutionary movement."

"What I have attempted here," PB says (p. 7) "is to make this movement intelligible to a general public, drawing on twenty years of my own experience. While serving as a Catholic priest in a barrio in Panama City in the 1960s, I went to South America to seek out Latin American theologians. Although I resigned from the priesthood in 1973, my work, especially as American Friends Service Committee representative in Central America from 1976 to 1980, has kept me close to the Latin American church. What I have learned there, the ideas of the theologians as well as commitment like Archbishop Romero's, has been a kind of compass for my own life, however errantly I may follow it." These lines from the book's introduction seem to me useful, to know what kind of work a reader of Liberation Theology should expect. "In this book I have tried to root liberation theology in events, and to show its practical impact at the village and barrio level. Nevertheless, my aim is not to tell the story of the churches in Latin America — that can already be found in many fine recent works — but to explain as clearly as possible the ideas of liberation theologians" (p. 8).

PB posits an initial description of liberation theology in these terms:

Liberation theology is (1) an interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor; (2) a theological critique of society and its ideological underpinnings; (3) a critique of the practice of the church and of Christians.

The book fleshes out this description as it comes alive in the experience, the practice and theological reflection of Latin American Christians and