

# THE EXPERT ON GOD

*By John L'Heureux*

*From the start faith had been a problem for him, and his recent ordination had changed almost nothing. His doubts were simply more appropriate to the priesthood now. That was the only difference.*

As a child of ten he was saying his evening prayers when it suddenly struck him that Catholics believed in three gods, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. He blushed and covered his face. What if the kids at school found out? They were Protestants, and therefore wrong, but at least they had only one God. Instantly it came to him that there were three Persons in one God. It was a mystery. He was very embarrassed but very relieved, and he actually looked around to see if anyone had heard his thoughts, and for the rest of his life it remained for him a moment of great shame. At eighteen, when he entered the Jesuits, he got up his courage and told this story to his confessor, who laughed. Matters of faith, he decided then, were better kept secret.

There were other doubts. He doubted Christ's presence in the Eucharist. He prayed for faith, and some kind of faith came to him, because he left off doubting about the Eucharist and moved on to doubt other matters: the virginity of Mary, the divinity of Christ, and then later the humanity of Christ. At one time or another, he doubted every article of belief, but only for a while, and only one at a time. Faith demanded a different response to each mystery, he discovered, but doubt was always the same. The initial onslaught of doubt lasted for only a moment, a quick and breathtaking conviction that none of it was true, and then that conviction itself surrendered to doubt, leaving an awful lingering unspeakable ache.

In the end he doubted the love of God, and that doubt did not pass.

He was a popular priest but he had no friends. He kept other Jesuits at a distance, he forced them away. He had no time for the intimacies of his own kind, caught up as he was in his assault on God. He prayed for faith. And when that did not come, he prayed for hope. And when that did not come, he went on anyway, teaching, preaching, saying Mass at the odd parish whenever he was asked. That is how things stood with him on the day of the accident.

It was Christmas Day, not because Christmas is symbolic, but because that is when it happened. Snow had fallen for nearly a week, and then on Christmas Eve there had been hail and then rain and then a sudden freeze. The streets were ready.

He had said Mass at Our Lady of Victories and was driving back to the Jesuit house. It was almost noon and the sun was high. "It doesn't matter," he said. The air was clear and the day was bright after all that snow, and as he drove through the vast open countryside, he marveled again at the absence of God. "It doesn't matter anymore."

He had very nearly achieved a kind of trance, staring at the sun on the ice, trying to obliterate all thought. Suddenly, off to the side of the road, he saw a dark blue car turned half on its side and three boys huddled near it, looking at him as if he might be bringing help. He braked quickly, skidded in a half turn, and came to a stop. It was then that he noticed the tiny red sports car in

the field on the opposite side of the road. It was crumpled nearly in two. The priest looked at the boys, but they only looked back, stunned. Finally one of them pointed to the red sports car.

He scrambled through the glove compartment until he found the little vial of holy oils. He sprinted toward the car, following the wild track it had made as it spun through the snow, and when he got to it, he was not surprised to see the front end was completely demolished. He stooped and looked through the shattered window. The driver had been thrown to the side; the dashboard, crumpled back into the car, had pinned him, head down, in the passenger seat. The door hung on a single hinge, open a few inches but not wide enough for the priest to get in. The door would not give and he could not force it to open wider. He looked around a moment for help and saw that of course there was none; the boys huddling together across the street were too stupefied to help—or maybe they were injured, for all he knew.

He put the vial of oils in his pocket and jogged rapidly around the car. There was no way in. Somebody was inside, dying perhaps, and though he was only a few inches away, he could not reach him. It was maddening. He struck the car with his fist and sobbed suddenly in anger and frustration. Desperate then, he braced his back against the side of the car, pushing outward on the broken door and twisting, half crazy, until the hinge gave way. He squeezed himself into the car behind the driver's seat. He could hear a kind of gurgling sound from the man trapped beneath the dashboard. He edged across until he was behind the passenger seat and, with what strength he could muster, he pulled back on it until it snapped and broke loose. He climbed onto it so that he was behind the body. He squatted, doubled up, hunched over, scarcely able to breathe, but at last he got his arms around the body and eased it free of the dashboard.

It was a boy, in his new car, and he was still alive, or nearly. He made a sound that might have been a sigh or a groan. Blood trickled from his mouth. Still he did not die.

The priest held him in his arms. Crushed himself, he nonetheless managed to get the oils from his pocket and to wet his thumb with them and to place his thumb on the boy's bloody forehead, saying "I absolve you from all your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." Then he was silent.

There was no sound from outside the car, no ambulance wail, no curious viewers. They were in the middle of nowhere, he and this dying boy he held in his arms. He had touched the boy with the holy oils and he had offered him absolution for his sins, and something should have happened by now. Someone should have come to help. The boy should have died. Something. But there was silence only, and the boy's harsh, half-choked breathing.

He began to pray, aloud, which struck him as foolish: to be holding a dying boy in his arms and reciting rote prayers about our father in heaven, about holy Mary, mother of God. What could he do? What could he say at such a moment? What would God do at such a moment, if there were a God?

"Well, do it," he said aloud, and heard the fury in his voice. "Say something." But there was silence from heaven.

His doubts became certainty and he said, "It doesn't matter," but it did matter and he knew it. What could anyone say to this crushed, dying thing, he wondered. What would God say if he cared as much as I?

He shook with an involuntary sob then, and as he did, the boy shuddered in agony and choked on the blood that had begun to pour from his mouth. The priest could see death beginning to ease across the boy's face. And still he could say nothing.

The boy turned—some dying reflex—and his head tilted in the priest's arms, trusting, like a lover. And at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gave up his prayers and bent to him and whispered, fierce and burning, "I love you," and continued till there was no breath, "I love you, I love you, I love you."