

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 30

Article 18

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October 2006

### Forum: What Shall We Read?: Getting a Life, The Letters of Paul

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#### Recommended Citation

Brackley, S.J., Dean (2006) "Forum: What Shall We Read?: Getting a Life, The Letters of Paul," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 30, Article 18.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol30/iss1/18>

## GETTING A LIFE

### The Letters of Paul

Dean Brackley S.J.

**A**s a nineteen-year-old Jesuit novice, I began to stay up an extra half-hour each night to read the New Testament. What I read in the *Letters of St. Paul* stunned me: We are forgiven and make peace with God, not because of good works we have done, but only when we accept the forgiveness that God freely offers. This is justification by faith, or by grace, alone. Along with this, our sole obligation is to love our neighbor; and, to do that, follow principally not norms (“the Law”), but the Spirit that prompts us from within. This was good news that set me off on an adventure that led, eventually, to understanding life and God in less hide-bound ways.

Years later Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* set my head spinning. Written in the 1920s, this pioneering work in the sociology of knowledge helped me appreciate how all our worldviews are highly vulnerable to criticism; they all float on basic assumptions that cannot be proven in a strict sense. Years before, while in college, after discovering Paul, my own childhood view of the world had come crashing down around my ears, introducing me in a painful way to the “crisis of foundations” that Mannheim described so well. Later I learned from Karl Marx (*The German Ideology*) how our worldviews are rooted in our practice and our social location — so much so that “the dominant ideas of each age are the ideas of the dominant social class.” Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* helped me steer clear of the seductive pretensions of positivism. Toulmin persuaded me that, while some arguments are better than others, almost none are air-tight, and certainly none that claim to prove what is real, or right, or important.

Instead of leading to skepticism, these insights helped convince me that the search for truth and for the right thing to do is far more than a matter of the head. It’s about “getting a life.” It’s about confronting the world, especially responding to suffering, and, yes, thinking things through, and also, crucially, taking those leaps of faith that are more reasonable than not leaping at all (St. Augustine). When we commit ourselves to such an authentic search, we can expect that same Spirit that Paul talk about to confirm that we are on the path to truth and that we are really discovering some of it. ■

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## WE ARE INCOMPLETE AND POOR

### Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*

Astrid O'Brien

**T**he book which, after the Scriptures, has had the greatest impact on my life is a very brief one: *Poverty of Spirit*, by Johannes B. Metz. In a mere 52 pages, the author has given us a profound meditation on the meaning of the Incarnation and its implications for our own lives. After a forward in which he presents his main theme — our reluctance to recognize and accept the poverty of being human — he considers in turn what it meant for God to become man in Jesus and what it would mean for us to follow his example. Metz is convinced that even if we acknowledge Jesus as our role model in theory, our daily lives often bear witness to a very different standard.

We do not *want* to be poor and dependent on God for everything. We would rather be rich: self-sufficient, and in full control of all that affects us. Are not these the goals our society holds out to us? We prefer not to face our inescapable finitude — the limitations placed on us by our culture, our opportunities, our talents, our physical energy, our financial situation and especially our mortality, which entails the impossibility of realizing all our hopes and dreams. Metz challenges his readers with the “categorical imperative” of the Christian faith: “You shall lovingly accept the humanity entrusted to you! You shall not continually try to escape it!”

Although an academic himself, Metz does not focus specifically on the dangers of the intellectual life; it seems to me that the temptation to believe in Jesus and live, nevertheless, as a Platonist is especially strong for those of us who are engaged in university teaching. The world of ideas is so fascinating, exciting and logical compared to the stubborn opacity of the world of material reality! All too easily we can forget that we are “beings in process”: incomplete, and, in that sense, poor. We must *choose* to become fully human. Success is not guaranteed; it is possible for us to fail. We can betray our humanity by running away from its burdens and difficulties, instead of accepting these as Jesus accepted his. He “held back nothing” — during his passion he surrendered everything “even the love that drove him to the cross.”

On the other hand, teaching and writing offer many opportunities to let go gracefully: of our insights,