

The Nonviolent Lamb of God

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

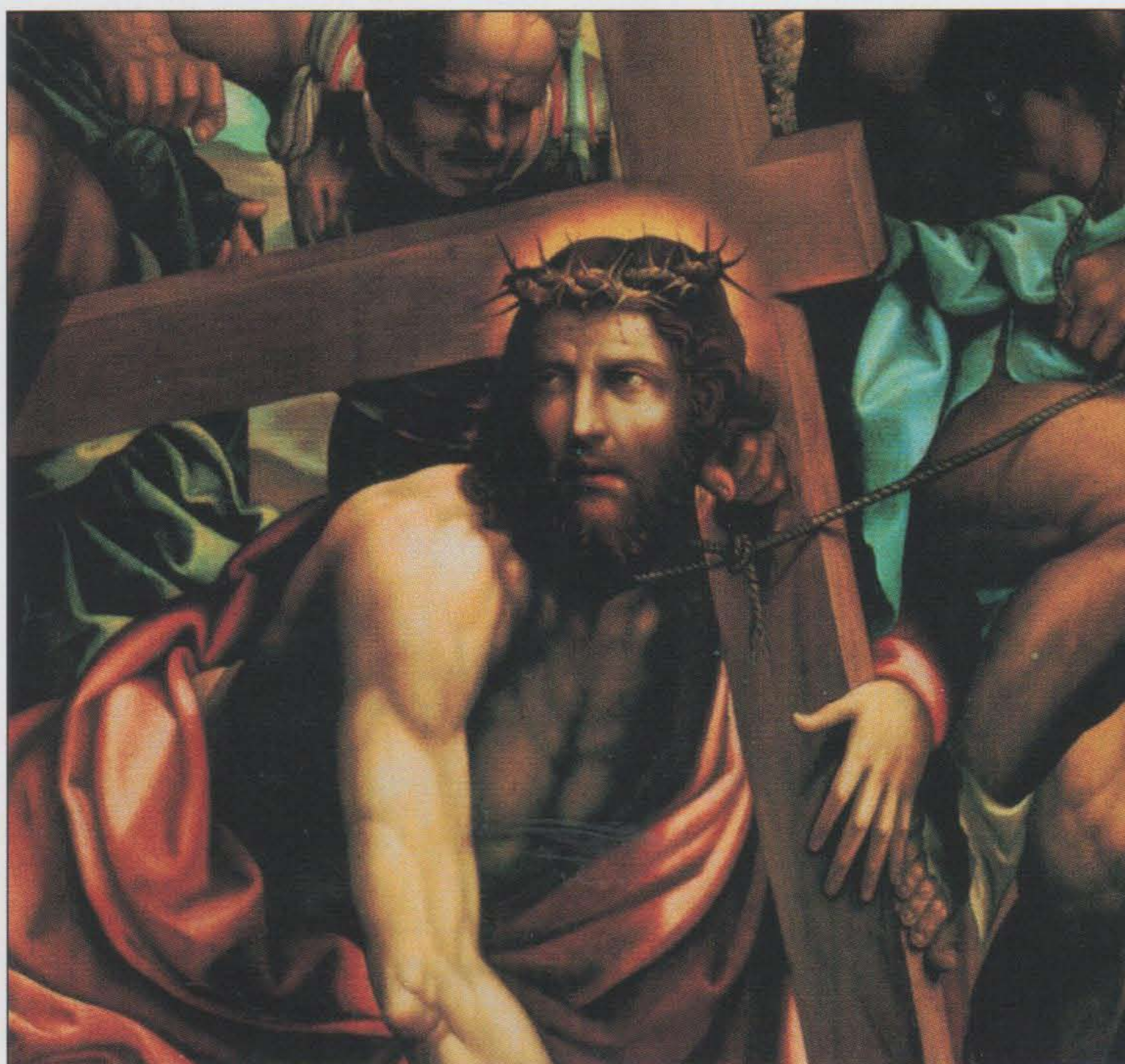
St. John the Evangelist describing the New and Eternal Jerusalem says,
 "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple was the Lord God Omnipotent
 and the Lamb. It had no need of sun or moon to shine on it; for the glory of
 God gave it Light, and its lamp was the Lamb." (Rv. 21:22-23)

Hebrew Scripture

The lamb is an unequivocal and universal symbol of gentleness, nonviolence, meekness and innocence. A violent, retaliatory, cruel, hateful, terrifying lamb is a contradiction in terms. "As gentle as a lamb" is a cliché common to innumerable cultures, yesterday and today. In Greece hundreds of years before Jesus, Aesop, the legendary storyteller, wrote, "The lamb prays to the Lord in the time of creation: 'Lord do not give me any weapons of defense, because if I have the means to hurt I shall wish to do so.'" Beyond this, in ancient ages sheep and lambs were the "money," the currency, the medium of exchange that was used to buy or to redeem whatever was desired. The Latin word "pecunia" which means money is derived from the Greek word "pecus" which means sheep.

Among the Jewish people of Old Testament times the lamb was the animal to be sacrificed to God for the benefit of the people. When the Father of Faith, Abraham, was taking his son, Isaac, up the mountain to sacrifice him, Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb?" Abraham answered in faith, "God will provide."

When God told Moses that on a certain night an angel of judgment would take the first-born in Egypt, God also told him that every Jewish household should kill and eat a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts, and if this were done the angel would pass



over that house and the Jewish people would be saved from death and freed from Pharaoh. Hence, the Passover Feast, that stands at the very heart of the Jewish religion as a remembrance of God's saving, delivering and rescuing power, requires the sacrifice of a lamb for the meal.

By extension, the lamb became the offering at other major Jewish Feasts, as well as the offering for those who wished to make atonement for personal sin. It was the lamb that was the twice-daily sacrifice (morning and evening) in the Temple until the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.

Finally, in the Old Testament there is that mysterious redeeming figure in the Book of Isaiah, the Servant of Yahweh or the

Suffering Servant. He is the pinnacle of nonviolent love in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is gentle, does not raise his voice in the street, a man of sorrows, afflicted and thought guilty by others:

*"Yet, ours were the sufferings
 he was bearing,
 ours the sorrows he was carrying,
 while we thought of him as
 someone being punished,
 and struck with affliction by
 God
 whereas he was being wounded
 for our rebellion,
 crushed because of our guilt;
 the punishment reconciling
 us fell on him,
 and we have been healed by
 his wounds.*

*We had all gone astray like sheep
 Each taking his own way
 And Yahweh brought the acts of rebellion
 Of all of us to bear on him.
 Ill treated and afflicted,
 He never opened his mouth,
 Like a lamb led to slaughter..."*

Isaiah 53:4-7

No one with even a slight familiarity with lambs, and no one with even a superficial acquaintance with the Old Testament could fail to grasp the characteristics of personhood that were intended when the first Christians designated Jesus by the symbol of the lamb: nonviolence, meekness, innocence, sacrificial love.

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Last Supper and the Crucifixion take place at the time of the Passover. The symbolism of the Last Supper as the new Passover Meal and of Jesus as the new Passover Lamb is obvious. Indeed in the Gospel of John, Jesus is crucified at the very hour when the lambs for the Passover are being slaughtered in the Temple by the priests.

The Jesus of the New Testament is the new Passover Lamb whose blood saves, delivers and rescues not just from the evils of Pharaoh-like political and economic oppression, but from all the satanic powers of evil and death. As St. Paul explicitly says, "Christ our paschal (Passover) lamb has been sacrificed" (1 Co. 5:7). As St. Peter explicitly says, "You know you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as gold or silver, but by the precious blood of Christ, the unblemished lamb" (1 P. 1:10).

Baptism

It is in the Gospel of John the Evangelist, that John the Baptist first speaks those words which billions of Christians over the centuries have heard just prior to Holy Communion: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). Then John says "I saw the Spirit come down (on Jesus) like a dove from the sky."

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, when John baptizes Jesus, the Spirit descends on Him as a dove and a voice, a revelation from heaven, says, "This is my beloved son upon whom my favor rests." (Mt. 3:17, Mk. 1:9-11, Lk. 3:21,22) It is universally understood in scripture scholarship that this sentence directly refers to the opening lines of the Hymn of the Suffering Servant (Is. 42:1). At His baptism at the beginning of His public ministry, the identity which Jesus receives and accepts is as the Suffering Servant, the gentle, nonviolent "lamb led to slaughter" for the good of others.

In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist proclaims "Behold the Lamb of God," (Jn. 1:29) the same truth, that Jesus is the Suffering Servant, is being communicated. The words, "Behold the Lamb of God" in Aramaic, the native language of Jesus and



John, are exactly the same words in Aramaic as "Behold the Servant of Yahweh (the Suffering Servant)." Therefore Christians, when they "behold the Lamb of God," are not only looking upon Christ, the new Passover Lamb, but are also gazing upon Christ, the Suffering Servant, the nonviolent "lamb led to slaughter" into Whom they are baptized.

It is critical to struggle to comprehend the fact that to be baptized into Christ is to accept to be baptized into the baptism into which He was baptized - and no other. That baptism, as has been said, is explicitly referenced by all four gospels to the nonviolent, gentle, sacrificial lamb of Isaiah's Hymn of the Suffering Servant. The Greek word baptism means "immersion." At Christian Baptism one is totally immersed into the new Lamb-like life of the Suffering Servant Messiah (Christ). St. Paul explains this by saying that "as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Ga. 3:27). To put on Christ is to put on the Lamb of God. Indeed, theologically and spiritually, personally and communally, it makes no sense to receive the Lamb of God in the Eucharist until one has put on the Lamb of God in baptism and thereby united

oneself with the Lamb and with one's fellow Christians in the Community of the Lamb, the Body of Christ (1 Co. 12:1).

Eucharist

The Eucharist is the celebration of the Community committed to the Lamb of God. The Passover Meal in the Old Testament is not just bread but is also the Passover lamb; the Passover Lamb of the New Christian Passover is the bread, which becomes the Lamb of God, the Body of Christ. In the ancient sister Churches of the East, Catholic and Orthodox, the consecrated bread is called The Lamb. Immediately prior to Holy Communion in the Western Church the community prays, "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us...grant us peace." The priest then raises the Sacred Host for the people to see and exclaims, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, happy are those who are called to His Supper." This dramatic moment in the Mass goes back at least to the seventh century in the Western Church. The designation of the sanctified bread as the Lamb goes back at least that far in Eastern Churches' liturgies. The Lamb is and has been the Church's Eucharistic symbol par excellence because the Eucharist is the celebration of the Community of the Lamb.

Now when the Christian beholds and consumes the Lamb in Communion it should be to deepen and/or sustain the New Life of the Lamb within him or her and within the Community. St. Augustine commenting on the worthy reception of Communion states, "If you receive well, you are what you receive...(therefore) be what you see and receive what you are." Each worthy reception of Communion should draw the Christian ever more profoundly into union with the Lamb. Every Eucharist that is what it is supposed to be should build up the Community of the Lamb through a more intense commitment to Communion with the Lamb via a more energized commitment to the Way of the Lamb.

Church

The Church is composed of Christians who were chosen and who choose to follow the Lamb of God, who is "meek and humble of heart." The Lamb of God is revealed in

time and space by those who follow the Way of the Lamb. The Church is set apart by God as the privileged place where the Lamb of God can be recognized. She follows this Way because She believes that the values, attitudes, beliefs and powers symbolized and affected by the Lamb are the axis around which the Church and salvation history must be ordered. She proclaims that the Lamb has conquered (Rv. 17:14) and therefore the Way of the Lamb, while embarrassingly naive to some and an illogical stance for others, is for those who believe in "the power and the wisdom of God." (1 Co. 1:24)

Social Responsibility

Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times after Peter replies in the affirmative Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." (Jn. 21:15-17) It is in the Holy Eucharist that the Church primarily feeds Jesus' lambs, and it is in the Holy Eucharist that the Church makes its greatest contribution to the creation of a truly human society. For if the Eucharist is allowed to be what it is supposed to be, then through the communicants' Lamb-like lives, the Eucharistic Lamb of God becomes the divine leaven in the human dough. The legitimate fruits of Communion with the Lamb are deeds of Lamb-like Love that release the power of God and reveal the wisdom of God in history.

The time has certainly come for Christians to repent and to stop using the Gospel and the Eucharist as means of justifying, indeed as a means of promoting, the Christian absurdity of baptized lambs in wolves' clothing. The time has certainly come for us Christians to honestly struggle to become what we consume. For centuries Christianity has been devastated and disempowered by the catastrophe of its own unwillingness to acknowledge without reservation that the Way of the Lamb of God is The Way, the Only Way, that evil is totally defeated (Rv. 17:14). What is worse is that this violent anti-witness to the Lamb of God has so often gone unnoticed or even justified.

Pope John Paul II is striving mightily to bring Christians face to face with the betrayals of The Lamb that have occurred in the past, e.g. inquisitions, wars, torture, abor-



tions, capital punishment, crusades, anti-Semitism, oppression, euthanasia, fratricide, sorocide, etc. He is trying to help Christians return to their right mind - the Mind of Christ. He is struggling to revivify the Heart that each was given at Baptism - the Heart of the Lamb of God.

John Paul II is conscious of the Biblical truth that sins, mistakes, misperceptions, misjudgments and evils left unnamed will multiply themselves with lavish zeal to the detriment of the Church and humanity. Yet, many Christians object to his efforts to clarify the Christian conscience and consciousness in relation to past betrayals of the Way of the Lamb. I suspect these folks feel that the Church will be discredited if it admits to participating in un-Christ-like behavior. I disagree. The contemporary mind assumes that the only people that hide things are people with something to hide. To try to conceal what is already partially known to exist is the most discrediting of stances in the modern literate world of global mass media.

Besides, what alternatives does the Pope

have? Ignore the un-Christ-like past and thereby allow it to propagate itself in the future under the name of the Lamb of God? How can the Successor of Peter, who was given the commission to "Feed my lambs," permit them to be fed spiritual food that will inhibit the development of a Christ-likeness? How could he nourish Jesus' flock with food that nurtures something other than a Lamb of God-likeness? To the contrary, Peter must struggle to feed Jesus' "little flock" with that spiritual food which will enhance its power to "love one another as I (Jesus) have loved you," (Jn. 15:22, Jn. 13:34) which will strengthen it to imitate the Lamb of God.

St. John the Evangelist tells us of the New Jerusalem that "The Throne of God and the Lamb will be there and His servants shall worship Him; they shall see Him face to face...and they shall reign forever and ever. (Rv. 22:3,4) To say that the Lamb will reign is the same as announcing, "the meek shall inherit the earth." (Mt. 5:4) To say that the Lamb shall rule over, indeed defeat, the imperial lion, the diabolical dragon, the brutal beast, the cunning and poisonous snake, is to speak sheer folly. (1 Co. 1:24) A lamb can no more defeat and rule over a lion, a dragon, a beast and a snake than a beaten, humiliated, destroyed "nobody" on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem can defeat the all-powerful, warrior-god-emperor Tiberius Caesar on his throne inside the walls of Rome. Yet to this day the name of that meek, humble, nonviolent "Nobody" on the cross is invoked ceaselessly throughout the world, indeed, today time itself is measured throughout the world by the life of that "Nobody." The seemingly all-powerful Tiberius Caesar has all but vanished into the oblivion of a historical footnote. Contrary to all human wisdom, the Lamb has conquered. The Nonviolent Lamb of God reigns.

The King of kings

We have all heard on innumerable occasions Jesus Christ referred to as "the Lord of lords, the King of kings." For instance, most people at least in the Western world are familiar with the repetitive use of this Biblical phrase in Handel's Messiah.

Television and radio evangelists employ it constantly. Street proselytizers are forever hitting people with it. And, it is never far from the lips of those who think humanity is in the "end times" and that the great war of Armageddon is closing in on us. But, what is consistently and almost universally omitted when recourse is had to this phrase is the subject for which this phrase is the predicate nominative. The passage in the Book of Revelations reads:

*They are all of one mind in putting
their strength and their
Powers at the beast's disposal and
they will go to war against
The Lamb; but the Lamb is the Lord
of lords and the King
Of kings and he will defeat them and they
will be defeated by
His followers, the called, the chosen,
the faithful.
(Rv. 17:13,14)*

The Lamb, not the beast, not the lion, not the dragon, not the snake, is "the Lord of lords and the King of kings." The Lamb!

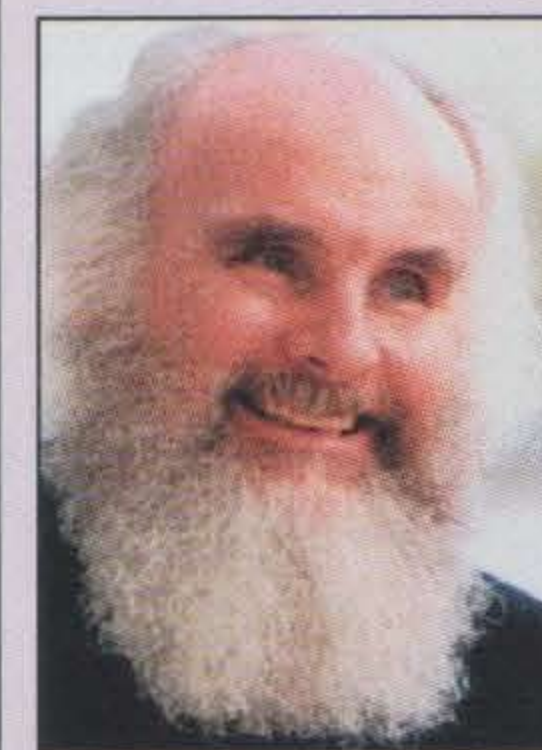
"The Lamb is the Lord of lords and the King of kings" because of His victory as the Suffering Servant on the Cross of Calvary - a victory that was secured not by a battle plan of violence, hate, retaliation, terror, cruelty and revenge but by a battle plan of humility, meekness, nonviolence, love of enemies, prayer for persecutors, the return of good for evil, the rejection of the sword, forgiveness, unlimited mercy and absolute trust in the Father. It is this battle plan, the Battle Plan of the Lamb, to which "His followers" must abandon themselves. They must all be "of one mind in putting their strength and their powers at the Lamb's disposal" if they desire to participate in the total defeat of the beast, of evil, of death.

*The Nonviolent Lamb of God
has conquered;
Him let us adore daily,*

*Him let us love daily,
Him let us consume daily,
Him let us imitate daily — until,
Until time is no more
And we meet within a Graceful and
Gentile Bliss,
In an Eternal face to face*

about the author . . .

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