

FREDERIC C. WOOD, JR.

1933 - 1970

The Reverend Frederic C. Wood, Jr., former chaplain and associate professor of religion at Vassar College, died of acute leukemia on October 16, 1970 in Sanibel, Florida. Mr. Wood was thirty-seven years old. He is survived by his wife, the former Jane Louise Barber, and by three daughters, Jennifer, Elizabeth, and Barbara.

Mr. Wood joined the Vassar faculty in 1967 after three years as an assistant professor and chaplain at Goucher College. Born in New Rochelle, New York, he received a B.A. degree from Cornell University in 1954 after graduation from Deerfield Academy. From 1954 to 1957 he was a Naval intelligence officer and Russian cryptolinguist with the National Security Agency. In 1960, he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Virginia Theological Seminary. In 1961, he received a Master of Sacred Theology degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and three years later he earned a Doctor of Theology degree from the same institution.

Before moving to Goucher College, he served as an assistant chaplain at Cornell and with Episcopal churches in New York and Richmond, Virginia. A specialist on the inter-relationships of psychiatry and religion, Mr. Wood lectured frequently before various civic and professional groups. His articles appeared in numerous journals, including "Theology Today," "The Episcopalian," and "Pastoral Theology." He was the author of two books: *Sex and the New Morality* (1968) and *Living in the Now* (1970). I

Mr. Wood welcomed the contemporary movement toward what he liked to call a religionless Christianity, toward the living of a faith stripped of antiquated dogmas and rituals. In a journal that he kept during the early months of leukemia, he wrote, "I have never been religious. My illness has not changed that. But at the same time, my thoughts and feelings have been profoundly theological. I have been dealing with ultimate things - the meaning of life and death and the question of what is ultimately important (which is the question of God)."

He knew that his understanding of biblical faith often was misinterpreted, that some thought he sacrificed his Judeo-Christian roots in order to be contemporary while others thought he sacrificed relevance in order to maintain a particular tradition. He responded that the style of life described in *Living in the Now*

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"is for me both relevant and traditional. It is the faith delivered to me as I perceive it in my time.... My wife and I often ponder that in over fifteen years of married life we have each radically changed. And yet we also know that we are the same people we were when we married. This is, I think, the same paradox. It illustrates why flexibility in the forms of religious beliefs (in the name of their Spirit) is such an important dimension of my theology."

Mr. Wood chose to live on the periphery of the institutional church because "this is the only position from which I can exercise the

ministry I feel called to exercise." The role of college chaplain appealed to him because the student of today is less concerned with "playing church on campus" than with "becoming a fuller person, with discovering his identity in an anonymous society, and with hammering out values which are relevant to the moral dilemmas which he faces."

Mr. Wood saw the task of the man of faith anywhere as witnessing to the values to which he is committed. The college chaplain, in particular, must be counted on the side of humanity against all those forces which tend to depersonalize the academic community. He also must "prick (its) social conscience in regard to the larger community which surrounds it." At Goucher and at Vassar, Mr. Wood gave himself early and fully to various civil rights projects and to leadership in the questioning of American policy in Viet Nam. In the fall of 1969 he co-sponsored a faculty caucus which might have become an effective force had he been able to continue his leadership.

Because his views often spoke to the prevailing mood among faculty and students, he sometimes was surprised and amused by the controversy they aroused beyond the campus. But his response to those who attacked his views was often far more sympathetic than those who supported him realized. He understood the pain and the perils of social change as well as its necessity. In a sermon delivered early in 1968, he welcomed the new mood among students of criticizing our laws and social order. But he added, "at the same time, I welcome it with ambivalent feelings. I suppose that is because I am still essentially a conservative where law and order are concerned. As a member of the much-maligned establishment - the same establishment of private secondary schools, WASPish upbringing, and ivy league colleges which has spawned many of you - I have some fundamental instincts of uneasiness at the prospect of any weakening of law and order. And I would think that those instincts are appropriate to others who do not share my background, since it has been my observation that the dissolution of law and order is finally more damaging to the disestablished and powerless than to FREDERIC C. WOOD, JR. - continued the established and powerful."

Mr. Wood's way with faculty and administrators, from whom he expected more and often discovered less, was equally direct. On October 31st and November 31st, 1969, this faculty debated the demands of the black students' sit-in. Already feverish from the leukemia that had not yet been discovered, Mr. Wood defended his unpopular cause, the ideal of integration, with an eloquence and lucidity which continue to haunt some of us. He never abandoned his conviction that only integration could bring about a true equality and meeting of black and white people. He was no utopian, but he had a vision of the way we must go. When he believed we were deviating from it, he could not keep silent.

We miss that courage and that candor. We should be worried by

his "suspicion that the wise men may not come to the academy any more." In Mr. Wood's words, "Just (like) the Church, so too our educational institutions, in our busy-ness, worldliness, and self-promotion may have no place for the wise men any more. It may be that we need a revolution in both the Church and the academy – revolution, in the best sense of that word, as referring not to violence or naked power-plays, but to change – a fundamental change in our understanding of what we are doing. Then the wise men may once again come, and offer their gifts and do their thing. Then we may teach one another to be more fully human."

Respectfully submitted,

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