



## HOW THE SPIRIT

## GUIDES THE CHURCH

by William H. Shannon

**R**ecent studies of the Bible and New Testament times have added much to our understanding of the Church. One of the significant insights is the realization that each of the Gospels has its own distinctive character and intent. If one compares the Gospel of Matthew with that of John, it quickly becomes clear that Matthew is the most ecclesiastical ("Church-oriented") of the Gospels and John the least.

In fact, the word *church* appears only twice in the Gospels, both times in Matthew. Thus, there is the well-known passage, in Chapter 16, about Peter as the Rock on which the Church will be built; and in Chapter 18 the description of the procedure for correcting an erring brother or sister. Three steps are outlined: First, you speak to the erring person one-on-one; if that doesn't work, you go with two or

three others; finally, if the erring one still remains obstinate, you refer the matter to the Church. Reading Matthew, one soon becomes aware that the Church of Matthew was a structured, hierarchical community with authority quite clearly defined.

### John's community of love

**M**oving from Matthew to John, you find yourself entering a completely different ecclesial world. *The community of the Fourth Gospel seems to have strongly emphasized equality among its members.* No hierarchy is mentioned, no structure described. The emphasis in the Johannine community is on the relation of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ. I should point out, though, that the Fourth Gospel offers no justification for a "Jesus and me" spirituality or a "Jesus as my personal

savior" mentality. No, the sense of community, expressed in such metaphors as the vine and the branches, the shepherd and the sheep, is very strong.

Coupled with this healthy awareness of community in John is the strong consciousness that the source of direction in the community lies not in a structured hierarchy, but in the Spirit, who both replaces Jesus and makes him present. It is the Spirit who leads the community into the truth. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth and of love. What distinguishes the community is the love the members have for one another.

If Peter is the hero of Matthew's Gospel, the role of hero in the Fourth Gospel belongs to a mysterious person who is not named, but who is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved" or "the Beloved Disciple." Significantly, the

## TWO VIEWS IN MATTHEW AND JOHN