

THE APOLOGETIC PROBLEM TODAY¹

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THE classical acceptance of the term 'apologetics' comprehends in general whatever bears upon the defence and justification of religion. And in the specifically Christian and Catholic context this becomes particularly a question of establishing the reasonable credibility of the revelation made by Christ and mediated by the Church. Hence the traditional treatises *de Revelatione* and *de Ecclesia*. But there is no question in the present paper of engaging in any discussion of these venerable themes. The problem is the more general one of *communication* in a certain context. It is the problem, namely, of communicating the Word of God to the contemporary mind. This is the perennial concern of every apostle. The solution brought to it will determine the whole course of his apostolate. And the first necessity of all is to recognise that the problem exists, and is novel with every new generation. Perhaps never so novel in its implications as in our own time.

By 'communication' I mean simply the 'getting across' of something to others. But it is in a particular context that we have here to do with communication—in the context of the *Word of God* vis-à-vis the *contemporary situation*. First, therefore, we should avoid the mistake of supposing that to 'get across' the Word of God is like 'getting across' anything else. For, strictly, it is not we who 'get across' the Word of God. He himself alone speaks to the faith of men. Nevertheless, he does use us, reasonable beings, as communicative instruments, and there is the problem of how we shall render ourselves apt tools to this work. We do, also, even in our own right act dispositively upon those to whom he, by our instrumentality, addresses his Word, and so prepare them for its reception; and this imposes upon us a problem of approach. Secondly, from the point of view of those with whom we are concerned, it is the *contemporary* mind that is

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to receive the Word of God. The questions therefore become: How to commend our speech that heralds the Word to just this mind, and how to win its readiness to hear the Word.

These are not the classical themes of apologetics. Yet there is a reason for describing the present problem of communication as the apologetical problem today. Apologetics is established always in the face of accusation. It is the Accuser, the Enemy, that makes defence and justification necessary. Defence is the counterpart to hostility. I want to suggest that the problem of the apostolate today—therefore the problem for Dominicans today—is precisely that the Word of God is on all hands received by our contemporaries with a certain *hostility*. It is a hostility rarely declared, sometimes felt obscurely, most often latent only and unrecognised. But hostility there is—I would say nearly *always*. The problem of the apostolate is how to overcome this hostility, what address may be made to the ‘Enemy’ to serve as vehicle to the Word of God, and what treatment may win his confidence.

It may serve my purpose to illustrate what I mean by a parallel between this and the long-drawn-out truce talks that have taken place at Panmunjom. There the problem was how to address peaceably an enemy whose terms of reference were very far removed from those in common acceptance in the West, and how to allay a deep and fearful suspicion of Western intentions. I am not for a moment wishing, by this analogy, to suggest that the Western world is the spokesman to the East of the Word of God. The parallel concerns simply the problem of communication. Our problem is how to address, peaceably, those whose standard terms of reference have become unrecognisably far removed from those of Christ and the Christian tradition, and how to allay in them their suspicion that their legitimate aspirations will be frustrated by the rule of Christ. Some of the apostles of Christ today do seem to me to be not unlike unobtrusive negotiators of peace who fail to recognise that their language has long ceased to be the language of their Accusers, and whose every action does only inspire a deeper and deeper suspicion of their intentions.

It is of course no new thing for the Word of God to be received with hostility. The Gospels may be read as the dramatically accumulating resistance to that Word when he came among men. 'His own received him not' (John 1, xi). He himself promised his apostles no other reception: 'Remember my word that I said to you: the servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you. . . . In the world, you shall have distress' (John 15, xix-xx; 16, xxxiii). But enmity, hostility, takes different forms. There is the straightforward enmity of two rivals on the same plane. They understand each other clearly enough, they fight about what they have in common. Such was the enmity displayed in most wars of the past. Each party knew very well what his enemy was at, and was out to defeat it. Our ideological warfare today is different. There is a more total confusion of purpose, an exacter reproduction of pandemonium. For now the parties make no common assumptions, they do not understand what each other is at, they fight increasingly about issues that each side expresses differently—issues that do not meet. They are not so much at cross-swords as at cross-purposes. There is not merely a withdrawal of accredited representatives, a temporary suspension of communication; there is the accrediting, if one may so say, of misrepresentatives, and, more seriously, a total breakdown of communication.

The kind of hostility with which the Word of God meets in the world today is, I suggest, that which is not merely in conflict with it, but at entire cross-purposes. Our problem as ambassadors of the Word is to discover a language that will not, upon being spoken, at once mislead the enemy; and to achieve a form of persuasion that will not, at once upon being brought to bear, arouse his resentful suspicion.

It may very well be objected that this has always been the case, that there has always been just this kind of misunderstanding of the Word of God, an ideological conflict in its extremest form just because of the invasion of nature by that which altogether exceeds the capacity of nature. The Word of God can be received only by those to whom is made the gift of faith; short of faith that Word must meet with total incomprehension: 'To you it is given to

know the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to them that are without all things are done in parables. That seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand' (Mark 4, xii).

I admit the full force of this objection. There has always been just that kind of total incomprehension on the part of man towards the Word of God. And it is an incomprehension that can only be overcome by the creative Word of God himself, effecting in us grace with faith. God alone can communicate himself. But he does use us to be the ministers of his self-communication. Now the world has always been hostile and incomprehending in this supernatural regard. But it has had, hitherto, its own human recognitions (very various, but always persistent) of its natural religious needs and of the claims upon it of the numinous. And hitherto when the ministers of Christ have claimed to speak of the Godhead and of religious destiny the world has understood clearly enough the general field in which their claim is made. Its opposition has been at two levels—the incomprehending opposition to the Word of God himself which belongs to that kind of hostility that I have typified by reference to our present ideological conflicts, and the straightforward opposition in the order of human religious interpretation which belongs to the sort of hostility that implies a mutual understanding and communication. If the apostles of Christ have been rejected in the past, it is because they have been taken for ministers of a false religion. But what is new, I suggest, to our time and generation is that this second opposition has itself become hostility of the ideological type because men no longer have any clear natural sense of what religion itself is. Incomprehension now greets the ministers of Christ not simply because they announce the incomprehensible mystery of God, but for the very fact that they are religiously convinced human beings. The enemy does not know, has not the faintest idea what it is all about. And like the Chinese communists at Panmunjom in face of the Western generals, the enemy feels obscurely that we are up to no good—that his aspiration to freedom is in some way to be frustrated. The problem of the apostolate is the apologetic problem of discovering a language that will mean something to the

average citizen of 1952, and of persuading him that his legitimate aspirations are not to be denied.

Before going further, I should perhaps apologise for so consistently referring to those who are to be embraced in an apostolate of charity as 'the enemy'. The expression is not to be taken in the sense for example that it has in the phrase 'the enemies of the Church'; nor do I intend by its use any derogatory crying down the good qualities and the manifold loveliness of every human creature for whom Christ has given his blood. I refer by this title of 'Enemy' or 'Accuser' rather to everyone in our generation, Catholics as well as non-Catholics, clergy as well as laity, self as well as others. And I use the expression not as a belligerent but in the spirit of such a rare peacemaker as would meet accusation by an attempt to discover and sympathise with the legitimate motives of the enemy's accusations. I use it to emphasise the latent hostility entertained by our generation against the Word of God, to bring out the problem, to show the sense in which there is a difficulty in the establishment of communication. We have to learn to address those whose general assumptions, alien from Christ, set them in the enemy camp. We need to analyse this uncomprehending hostility in greater detail; we need to know something of its aspirations, we need to offer it, if possible, some fulfilment.

Perhaps this will seem an exaggeration. Are there not devout Catholics who throng our parish churches? Are there not the members of Catholic Societies, the readers of Catholic reviews? What of the humble faithful, with their devout prayers, their rosary at home—and the many outside the Church who follow Christ with zeal and find his grace a living power in their souls? Are these all enemies? And I—am I also, as I write, an enemy?

Yes, in our measure, all of us, I am bold to say, are *enemies*.

For one moment let us marshal some representatives of our generation. I summon them at random, a year's chance acquaintances. There have been the tramps who come to any Priory door for what they can get, with a story; the respectable trademen, and the glazier and plumber, and the printer's callow apprentice, and the Oxford or Birmingham

professors of arid (and not so arid) philosophy, and the engineer turned student of psychiatry, and the motor-cycle engineer full of social theories, and the sensitive Anglican divine; the Judge of Assizes, the retired Service folk with their ladies and daughters suspicious at the novelty of the definition of the Assumption and about the mother-and-child controversy, the bewildered ex-Airborne officer trying his hand in a new job, the hardheaded business administrator, the soft-spoken artists and students and pliable young men of vaguely cultural pursuits; and the technicians and the commercial travellers and off-hand maids and waitresses and secretaries and bright or tired shop assistants, bus-conductors, nurses, policemen, navvies; a briskly competent doctor, an exact accountant, aldermen and councillors arrayed about their Labour mayor.

As the procession (and how wearisomely it might be prolonged!) passes before the mind's eye, the honest observer will, I suppose, catch himself warming in sympathy towards some, coldly indifferent to others, prejudiced against not a few. Do they come under any one common formula? It is difficult to know what it can be. But they are all invited into membership of the Body of Christ, they have all souls to save, the Word of God is to be brought to them all. We cannot afford to select for salvation only those who appeal to our taste, to lavish care upon them only. And this is our temptation—to have our own specialised apostolates (very often an apostolate carried out among the long-since converted) and to leave 'the others'. In theory 'the others' will be catered for by other apostles with other tastes. In practice (and this is the point of summoning the medley), these others constitute that vast majority of our contemporaries whom we, as a body, leave entirely untouched. They are the entirely secular, they are those upon whose lives and daily round not so much as the shadow of supernatural religion is cast.

It is these 'others', the millions 'untouched', the entirely secular (who may indeed have spiritual values and insights, but always short of the supernatural) it is these who set the problem for us, set it in relief. I do not say that they alone *constitute* our problem, but that they set it out in relief.

The problem arises, I think, with regard to all, not only with regard to those who are left beyond our reach. These escape our reach just because our approach to those others with whom we feel at home is inadequate, improper to the time, not sufficiently universal. We approach even those whom we do approach by way of conventional rules that no longer hold. We are like those guards on the island of Kojé who have scrupulously applied the nineteenth-century rules and regulations governing the administration of prisoner-of-war camps, and failed to notice that the rules no longer apply and no longer really work; that they play into the hands of unscrupulous prisoners who use them but do not abide by them. With a handful of the prisoners the rules work—by chance. But it is more good fortune than otherwise that the handful is there, and has not yet been liquidated by the People's Courts within the compounds. Even so we go on using the old approaches, talking the old worn-out language to the men and women of our time. With a handful it works; but more by good luck than otherwise. And it is the general situation, the whole camp of mankind run unruly and heedless of the Word of God, that shows up our methods. When we say that we do well enough by the people whom we do touch, and that it is simply a question of finding out how to reach the others (by a further extension), we are like people who might say that there was no real problem on Kojé, the old methods were right enough, and it was only a question of finding out how to extend control over the prisoners who had got out of hand. But that is exactly to miss the point. The point is that a prisoner-of-war camp in the total warfare that communism is conducting against the West is not the same sort of thing at all that prisoner-of-war camps have always been in the past. It is no longer a group of belligerents, as it were, in suspense. It has become a new arm of belligerency, an enclave of hostile activity potent for propaganda. The old rules do not apply. So it is with the apostolate. The old rules do not apply. Contemporary human consciousness and experience to which our approach has to be made is no longer the same thing as it has been in the past. It has an incomprehension of religion and religious destiny that is new.

It is too large a task adequately to analyse the roots of this incomprehension. Briefly it seems to me to lie in the very achievement of our generation, the technical character of our time. We have perfected techniques. The technical character is twofold; it is materialist and it moves in the order of numerical abstraction. Quite properly it is concerned with the material order, and with this by means of formulae mathematical or statistical in tendency. At its best it insists upon function and accuracy. There can be no quarrel with this as long as it remains within its own proper bounds. But it invades the precincts of the human spirit, and it has pretensions to constitute a total wisdom. When a generation comes to the point at which personalities are planned and human beings are registered and categorised and reduced to the terms of social equations, then there is grave danger that all reality, material as well as spiritual, elemental forces, soil, flesh and blood, soul, God, will be eclipsed in abstraction. This is the point which we have reached. We are the Unrealists; and we are afraid, when we are confronted by the Word of Reality, that the techniques which have led us to Unreality must be sacrificed at his altar, and that we shall lose the freedom of modern men. Deep in us lies this hostility, and for defence we set incomprehension in our consciousness. The problem of the apostle is to make technique appear for what it is: the expression of man's share of God's creative Word; and to overcome the suspicious fear of the technicians.