

# The Sacrament Machine: Rumbles from the Production Line

Bruce Harbert

Antony Archer rightly suggests ('Dismantling the Sacrament Machine', *NB* January 1975) that present Church structures impede the preaching of the Gospel, and that the laity must begin to do tasks from which they have hitherto been cut off, in particular that 'it is urgent that the laity take preaching into their hands'. He points to the inadequacy of much present-day priestly preaching, and discusses the possibility of such a move as forbidding the clergy to preach, but concludes: 'However, such a move as forbidding the clergy to preach, superficially attractive though it is, would only compound the present distortion. After all the priest is ordained to preach the Gospel and attempts to change the Church should be in accordance with its theology'. It is this last point that I wish to develop.

Nobody would deny that there are many lay people who have the gift and vocation of preaching the Gospel, and are able to do it better than most priests. But preaching remains an inalienable part of Christian priesthood. You can be a preacher without being a priest, but not a priest without being a preacher. If we stress the sacramental functions of the priest at the expense of his preaching role, or vice versa, we distort our picture of his office. Though individuals may be more suited to one task than to the other, priests must be trained for both, and both must be expected of them. To train a man to administer the sacraments without training him to preach is like teaching a violinist to stop the strings with his left hand, without showing him how to wield the bow in his right. The reason for the interdependence of the two roles lies deep in the nature of the Gospel itself. Christ came both to speak and to act: he both utters, and is, the Word of God. Indeed, it is hard to conceive what is meant by administering the sacraments without preaching, since all human gestures reveal something about those who make them, and so every sacramental act communicates, proclaims, preaches, though it may do so very badly. Bro. Antony has fallen into a trap when he says 'By preaching is meant here verbal communication', since the verbal is inseparable from other forms of communication.

Sometimes one hears preachers say that they have no wish to be priests, but sooner or later most of them find themselves in a context that makes them desire priesthood, often in one-to-one counselling, when the natural conclusion to a disclosure-situation seems to be absolution, the sacramental and ecclesial sign of God's forgiveness. The

preacher longs to give this sign, thus stumbling on the inextricability of word and sacrament. It is this inextricability that led the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council to speak of the people of God being nourished at the table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ, and that engenders the emphasis laid by modern liturgical practice on the Liturgy of the Word and the Homily as an integral part of the liturgical action.

A priest recently invited a non-conformist minister to preach at Mass, mentioning that he would not be able to invite him to share in the Communion. The minister, accepting, pointed out that, had he been consistent, the priest would have invited him to do either both or neither. This is surely a sound Catholic instinct, as is that of the layman who feels uncomfortable when asked to preach at Mass. The bond between word and sacrament demands that he who breaks the bread should break the word.

Sacramental life is related to the ordinary rhythms of human life, of eating, drinking, washing, wedding, caring for the sick and so on. For this reason it will inevitably be to a certain degree regular, structured, predictable, rhythmic, which does not of course make it boring. It is the task of the priest *qua* sacramental minister to take part in this rhythm, and also as preacher to interpret the scriptures that are read regularly in the liturgical cycle. But his role as a preacher will also oblige him to break the rhythm, to allow the Word of God to cut like a two-edged sword, challenging, disrupting, dislodging, revolutionising. It may be that there are some men who are called to question, challenge, shatter, but not to build, and that they are called to preaching but not to priesthood. Certainly, a healthy church demands a coexistence of stable and mobile ministries which have often been exercised by seculars and regulars respectively, though by no means always, and certainly not necessarily.

Church structures are crumbling so fast that human hands are hardly necessary for the task of dismantling: they would be better employed at some other job. As so much disappears, those who find themselves committed for life to traditional institutions inevitably ask what alterations are called for in their own houses. Mendicants in particular find themselves in a church that links preaching and sacraments more closely than at any time since their foundation, and so ask, as Bro. Antony hints, whether they need to think of their preaching role as more closely linked with priesthood, or to choose preaching alone, perhaps no longer requesting ordination. The resolution will, of course, be more subtle than a simple choice between alternatives, and will vary from man to man, from time to time, and from place to place.

But if institutions founded after the Fourth Lateran Council have had sour grapes to eat, how much more sharply are set on edge the teeth of the children of Trent. Seminaries, as Bro. Antony hints, also have their problems, springing from the fact that they were conceived as places to initiate men into the clerical style of life, a life-style that has all but vanished. Structures are certainly collapsing, and while it would not be desirable to do away with seminaries altogether, so evading the

responsibility of educating priests, the appropriate form of seminary life is far from clear. Such institutions must, at least, be communities that support and challenge their members in a life of study and prayer. The recent increase in vocations to priesthood in England, in some dioceses at least (Bro. Antony needs to scrutinise some recent figures), suggests that men are still hearing the call to the ministry of word and sacraments. The machine may be falling to bits, but the harvest is still there to be reaped.

### PATRICK AND OISIN

Aside from their tenebrous conversation, I sat learning my catechism with its woodcut mysteries and polysyllabic runs, its 'clandestine solemnisations', its 'morose delectation and concupiscence'. In the stove-warmed kitchen, neighbours' names seeded and uncurled upon their tongues, a back-biting undergrowth mantling the hard stones of 'calumny and detraction'.

Father Hughes had clapped the frost out of his gloves and clattered the silenced room. 'Hands up who said their morning prayers this morning'. My hand was a tendril reaching with the others, 'Who'll say their catechism'?

The night wore on. The phrases that had sapped my concentration atrophied, incised tablets mossed and camouflaged by parasites and creeping greenery.

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