

nature is to conserve, to enclose, to make safe and secure. This is not a weakness, it is how mankind finds the strength to go forward. The call to freedom must always be in tension with the deep-felt human demand for the law, the old always in tension with the new. Women must look both ways. They must experience the irreducible contradiction as something to be lived, suffered. At last woman can stand beside man as an equal, his counterpart. She can at last become the right size—neither a huge, primitive, protecting and destroying goddess, nor a tiny, submissive figure overpowered by patriarchal majesty.

From Priesthood to Marriage

by Andrew Bebb

It seems strange to think in terms of 'conversion' when reflecting upon the experience of leaving the priesthood. The transformation of the priest into the husband and father has been called many things, A 'betrayal'—that was a bishop; a 'defection', an 'act of madness' a 'second adolescence of the late thirties', a 'good riddance', but hardly a 'conversion'. Yet, for me, that is exactly it.

I think it is worth the trouble to try to explain why. Not least because the witness, both theological and personal, of a growing number of stable, happy husbands and fathers who were once priests may be of positive value in the midst of the Church. We think so, anyway. Our families meet regularly. One resolution we all share: to love the Church and to meet the occasional rebuff without bitterness. Howsoever we may be regarded, and institutional rejection is surely understandable at the moment, there is no doubting that we do increasingly present a new phenomenon in the life of the Church. We are convinced that we have more than embarrassment to offer to the Church, but something creative and fruitful. Perhaps it may lie in the emergence of trained theologians who are also devoted and happily married men immersed in the secular society. Theology has surely limped long enough in the idealistic world of the professional celibate.

Let me offer my own reflections, anyway, as a first contribution. If one word could express the whole new orientation of my own world, it would be 'incarnational'. And this in an experiential context. My own saddest experience of priesthood was directly contrary. This may be a commentary on my own inadequacy, but yet I feel that it is the obvious defect of the Church ministry as a whole. To be on the fringe of human life, to inherit and to inhabit an illusory 'sacral' area of reality mediating an absent God; to

fill in the gaps, gaps which are growing narrower as the Catholic laity grows towards autonomy. How much energy we put into holding these gaps open—the need for absolution, for worship, for the holy, for the priest, for religion; the need for the whole world of supernature. In so far as the Church takes this as her stand, she is most certainly fighting for survival. Small wonder that ‘relevancy’ is the catchword of catechetics.

I described my own experience as one of ‘conversion’. That may sound ‘fundamentalist’ and there is a link. The link lies in an understanding of the nature of faith. Faith is neither a commitment simply nor yet a trusting acceptance of information about an absent reality. It is simply the interpretive capacity of love/knowledge which enables a man to experience the whole of his environment as mediating the presence of God. God is no absent reality. There are only degrees of the intensity of his presence. There is nothing, no experience which is so opaque that it does not mediate transcendency, the vast overflowing of love activity. All this may sound obvious but, as I said, it is the experiential realization that makes the difference. To hold your wife or your own son in your arms and to be at the mercy of love, to be at the mercy of God.

All of us have learned with varying degrees of surprise, that which married people have always known, that love is not quantifiable. An excess of love given to those nearest to you only serves to increase the capacity for loving those further away. Every individual ‘thou’ of our loves mediates the transcendent ‘Thou’ of Him who is Love. Why is it that the thirty or so ex-priests I know, who have become husbands and fathers, all without exception claim to have discovered an authenticity in their Christian living that they had not previously known? Is it answer enough to affirm that previously we were misfits and oddballs? Perhaps, though I think not. Even the superficial evidence is against it. How does one judge normality, anyway, and in retrospect too? Perhaps the abnormality may lie in the vacuum which is sapping the energy of the Church. The sheer lack of this kind of faith, of love/knowledge.

The God of the Church is so often an absent God. An absent God who needs all the professionalism and equipment of religion to put us in touch with him. She spends so much of her time ‘waiting for Godot’ in this vale of tears, or straining her eyes backwards to the past. This absence of the living God is reflected at so many levels within the Church. The priest is not permitted by the unthinking structure to be that which he was commissioned to be. Instead of a ministry of and to humanity, he must be a minister of religion. His definition lies in being, not in doing; in the sacramental character rather than in the sacramental intensity of his concern. To be is enough. The spirit is like a fire and a wind, and yet most of his time seems to be spent erecting asbestos wind-breaks.

It is difficult to drop all of our preconceptions and to become as little children. To become like them, agnostics, with expectancy as

our point of departure. To let go of our self-constructed God images, and to meet each new relationship as a revelation, a revelation of the inwardness at the heart of all meaning. It is still a hard saying: 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house for the land I will show you.'

We have acquiesced too long in an understanding of the 'human' taken from metaphysics or behaviourism. We are afraid of accepting the human in its fullness, and so we objectify it, we label it, we systematize it. The infinite explorability and uniqueness of a human being threatens the existence of any system, any institution which attempts simply to functionalize human relationships. The system reacts to the threat by turning the human being first into a rebel, then into an outcast, or, failing that, into a figure of ridicule with a clown's costume or a crown of thorns.

It is possible even to reach the stage of taking refuge from personal self-realization behind our own self-imposed labels, whether 'Christian', 'Roman Catholic', 'Protestant', 'Agnostic'. We invite objectification within the context of religion.

A human being can only be known in so far as we encounter him in the signs through and in which he reveals himself to us. To have faith, to have love/knowledge, requires us to 'be with', 'to meet', 'to encounter'. What we know is the mystery of the otherness of him, which can never be comprehended or objectified. Hence it must always include unpredictableness and reverence. When the two disciples sought to know Jesus as object by asking, 'Rabbi, where do you live?', he replied, 'Come and see'. When Moses sought to objectify God by asking his name, his label, so that he could be come to terms with, be controlled by possession, the reply was, 'I am who I am'. He is known only in the encounter, the activity. In this is man the image of God. His vocation is to become pure activity in the new life; his being a becoming, flesh to become Spirit.

To be human is not a status conferred at the outset. It is the existential vocation of each individual, of the Church as a social entity, as it was of Jesus in his own life history. This is the eschatological vision and mission of the Christian; the humanization, the gracing of the face of the earth. This is the fundamental Christian belief, a belief in man. Not as an act of social optimism, or humanistic hubris, but as the simple conviction that within man is God encountered and finally revealed in the resurrection. 'He who has seen me, has seen the Father.'

The pattern of its achievement is the same old paradoxical one of Jesus: to transcend our individuality and isolation by moving out to the other in a life of self-surrendering love, to achieve finally like him our own human completion and uniqueness in the total self-surrender of physical death.

This is the vocation of the Church as well as of each individual, for it is through the self-surrender of the individual that the Church comes into existence as a human community. To be the humanizing

leaven of society, to affirm in action its belief in man, to strive until she is co-terminous with all who have the capacity for self-reflection, to become 'the family of man'. This vocation of the Church is a vocation to an unrealizable perfection and fulfilment. The intensity and extent of her hidden sacramental presence among men can never be accurately determined. All that is clear is that wherever the pattern of self-surrendering love, however unconsciously and inarticulately, reveals itself, there is the Church, there is Jesus, there is the self-revelation of God.

This is no plea for an invisible, unidentifiable, spiritual Church. Whilst the Church is indeed the community which embraces every situation among men in which the 'humanity of God' (Barth) reveals itself, however secretly, nevertheless it is continuously called as a community to express that revelation in a visible, distinct, and organized fashion. Provided always that 'event precedes institution'.

The concern of theology is surely to work out the existential implications of the Christian paradox, from the fundamental affirmation that the world makes sense and is revelatory of transcendent love, to the consequences for culture, liturgy, social welfare, education, art, literature, economics, etc. If, on the contrary, Christianity is allowed to become a deistic religion, and it so often has, it speaks to the world from the outside, and its god-posture is characterized by condemnation and conservation of the status quo. Instead of relieving human alienation from within, it becomes a further causative factor of such alienation by its support for the static, accepted order in society (the 'world'), and by its divinization of hierarchical authority of whatever source.

The essence of man and of society is only realized in activity, the activity of love. The uniqueness of humanity lies in this. It is realized and actualized in the self-surrendering response of love. It is a process: a process without completion, for its completion can only be perfection, the perfection of God. In all this is realized in humanity the image and presence of God. For the Word has been and is being made flesh. It is always coming in being, always immanent, always imminent, never realized, never fixed, never static.

The great temptation is to stop moving, to settle for the now, for the security of the eternal present, for the recurring cycle of pseudo-change. This is the essence of sin. Sin is essentially anti-historical in both individual and communal terms. It is the tendency to call a halt, to revert to the security of the past, to stop the world and get off.

The perfection of charismatic celibacy must indeed be a liberating thing. To be free for others, totally free, free as the wind, free as Jesus was free. To be so free that identification with all men is possible. Identification with men's injustices, their guilt, their anxieties, their joys. An identification which springs from the same self-surrendering love that was in Jesus and which leads into that which is truly human. To be of all men the most human. But it is a

rare and precious thing. Striving and sometimes stumbling towards this ideal, many priests have been truly an enrichment to the human community.

The institutional celibacy which most of us seem to have been alone strong enough to know, is on the contrary a deadly and destructive thing. Far from freeing one for others, its effect is directly contrary. In its artificiality and unreality, it can cushion a man from real suffering, real love, real guilt, real fear, even real joy. It opts so often for the deadly security of the eternal present. Like so many, I became a professional, nose pressed against the windows of other people's lives, protected from every suffering, except self-pity.

Becoming a husband and father has been my 'conversion' into the reality of Christian love. It means to live at the mercy of one's love, to agonize with concern, to explode with joy, to live with fear. Incarnation is the key-word. To truly encounter God within the midst; the totally other, who is totally close.

Like each of us, the Church is ambivalent. We are all tempted to select prematurely the wheat and the tares. At the end, the most any of us can do is to live by the enlightenment that is given to us, and to offer it without pride to the community for refinement and enrichment. I began by describing my own experience as that of a 'conversion'. It was a conversion into movement, into change, into activity, into love, into an unpredictable future. Experimentally at least, it was a 'rejoining of the human race'.

Earlier, I suggested that ex-priests like myself might have something more than embarrassment to offer to the Church. Some of us, together with our families, have become a rather loosely knit group. We meet regularly for the refreshment which inevitably derives from shared experience both spiritual and social. Amongst our number there are teachers, lecturers in higher education, university students, social workers, probation officers, a personnel manager, a prison governor, not to mention nurses, housewives and mothers (and babies!). We include a wide spectrum of life in the secular city, I think.

We have no defined programme of action. We have all had our fill of unnecessary systematization. All that we seek to be, is to be available. Available for advice and support for those who leave, and also indeed, for those who stay. Available to the community of the Church at large in a variety of capacities. Already some of us have given retreats, led family days of recollection, represented Catholic teachers in an official capacity, conducted a parochial catechesis for non-Christians, taught in Catholic and non-Catholic schools, etc.

Opportunities for such activities will undoubtedly increase, in spite of official institutional disapproval. I am convinced that the inhuman and unchristian legal process which the institutional Church reserves for those who leave her service, is not the last word, nor even the authentic word which is spoken over them by the Body of Christ.