

Comment

Words versus blows

How could one of the results of the assassination of Olof Palme possibly be a greater need than ever for better liturgical language? What a frivolous idea. Yet this is the case.

Surely there is something immensely symbolic about the death of this national leader who was so ardently dedicated to the causes of international peace and social justice, and who believed that he could safely walk the streets of Stockholm unguarded. The deaths of Jack Kennedy and Mrs Gandhi were, of course, more momentous, but it is the death of Palme that marks the end of the rule of sweet reasonableness everywhere. No leader of any country, not even Sweden, can live like him any more. Bring on the guns. Fling out the trust.

Whatever may have been the killer's motive, open democratic society is the real victim. In certain situations—say, the current South African one—resort to some kinds of violence is no doubt morally justifiable, but we are fools if we forget that no violence, however admirable the motives behind it, can avoid being a vote—even if quite a weak vote—against the rule of trust and reason.

We are ineffective observers, it seems to many of us, watching the rule of violence spread before our eyes: not only the obvious kinds of violence, personal and public, but the more subtle kinds too, perpetrated by statute and cheque-book and slogans in the media. What should be the Christian response to this boom in barbarism?

The easiest thing to do is throw up the sponge, and drift into something rather like that state of pessimism that hit St Augustine after the sack of Rome, when he thought the Sixth Age of the world had come, the *senectus mundi*. Unfortunately if we do that we will almost certainly end up by joining the enemy, convincing ourselves that the answer lies in the law-and-order programmes of the right, although all the statistics show that hardly any of these work properly, and certainly do not solve the basic problems.

Or we can go for the tough but arguably the only realistic option. In line with what Charles Davis has to say in this issue, we can conclude that political engagement is of the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. Logically this means that, if we can, we should plunge ourselves into politics, or at least 'perform the service of living as a sign of hope', like Angela West (another of our authors here) and her friends.

However, (and now, at last, we shift away from banalities), if we go for option two we must not underestimate the forces we are taking on. We have to prepare ourselves properly or we will be badly harmed—physically and spiritually. In the kind of world we are in there must—at times—be a certain amount of distancing from that world by *all* Christians who are at all serious about their religion, and particularly

by those who are political activists. This ‘distancing’ is something very different from ‘flight’. It is certainly not an abandoning of the mission to the world. It is the distancing needed to get things—all things—in perspective.

One important contribution to the distancing process—arguably the most important—should be the Church’s public worship. Poetry matters. But, because of the kind of society we live in, in our public worship ‘community’—that idea so central in Catholicism—has tended to be equated with ‘clarity’. ‘Clarity at all costs’ is an aspiration that the Church might have picked up from the advertising industry in the 1960s, but, if so, it is a dated one—just look at the present-day advertising industry’s very subtle use of language and symbols to see that. The language that everybody can understand immediately, the language of the airport and the supermarket, is not the only language, and it is not the language that best touches the human heart.

Over the years this journal has given little space to charting the interminable battles over liturgy—we have not seen this as our job. We have, on the other hand, published quite a lot on language and symbolism. As we were saying in this column only a couple of months ago, if so many people find church-going so unattractive one of the reasons must be that there is something wrong with our handling of symbols there. And last June, in our special issue ‘Ratzinger on the Faith: a Response’, Fergus Kerr, after making the point that nearly all Catholics pick up nearly all their theology through the liturgy, not through books, criticised sharply some of the translations in the Roman Missal (pp. 306f.). Here we would put the call for better language in the liturgy even more strongly: we need it as part of our campaign for survival.

The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) is in the course of revising the translation of the Missal, and, as a contribution to the discussion, the Association for English Worship has just brought out *Prayers of the Roman Missal* (Saint Michael’s Abbey Press, Farnborough, Hants., UK; £4.95), which presents for comparison a selection of prayers in the Latin and ICEL versions, and in a new AEW translation. Reading these aloud is a revelation. Their sentence-structure is more complex, but any clarity lost is regained by rhythm. They are theologically stronger.

This is, of course, only one small though very good contribution to one part of the task we face—the task of making the Church a place where people can distance themselves in a creative way better than they can at the moment, so that they can confront better a violent world. There is a lot to be done. But some of us are learning something new about the Church and about ourselves. As barbarism grows, quite a lot of Church activity which some years ago would have been dismissed by the ‘activists’ as ‘unimportant’ and ‘irrelevant’ is now coming to seem to be quite important and relevant after all.

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