

WHAT'S IN A CHRISTIAN NAME?

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ADOLESCENT CATHOLICS have been leaving the Church in the West in alarming numbers for several decades. The present danger is that we may accept this wholesale departure as inescapable if not normal, and try to carry on more or less as before. The departure of one person from the Church is a serious matter; the departure of the great majority of adolescents over four decades is a very serious matter indeed. And it must be said that, very welcome though recently-arrived Catholic immigrants are, only superficially do they take the place of those who have left. The apparent lack of a sense of crisis in most of those who have departed, and the lack of great concern on the part of the Church at large, suggest that we are not dealing with a purely youth-related problem, but with a weakness in the life of the Church. In particular it challenges us to review our understanding and practice of Church communion. I shall suggest that important developments in our culture invite this, and try to indicate where the path of progress lies.

The Dignity of Each Person

The fact is that the exodus of youth from the Church coincided with a very significant, if quiet, social change, the shift of attention to the individual person as such. The point comes through very clearly by referring to an investigation by the Irish Government into the administration of orphanages and similar institutions in the republic. Various abuses and shortcomings were set out in the report. But probably more insightful than anything in the report itself was a photograph in a Dublin paper of the vast dining-room in Artane Indus-

trial School, one of the institutions under scrutiny, with tables, table settings and chairs in perfect uniformity and order. It made its point because our sensibilities have changed. We recognise now that order and uniformity are ill-adapted to the welfare of young people. Sixty years ago the Artane system was regarded as standard, if not a model. Since then society has fortunately come to pay much more attention to the particular unique person. The Irish institutions, and indeed the Irish Government, were tardy in recognising this.

We can appreciate the significance of the change only if we remember how deeply and widely entrenched the old system was in the Western world. It dates back to Plato, who laid the foundations of social thinking there. He saw society in functional terms; each person had a role which harmonised with the roles of others, so that the whole functioned smoothly. He considered justice to be a mark of the whole of society and not something due to the individual. The individual person as such did not enter his calculations; still less did the idea that the recognition of the individual might challenge imposed order and uniformity. Until well into the last century, society was substantially ordered according to role and status, and communication between members of different grades both structured and restricted. When Charles Dickens came to providing for Oliver Twist the just outcome he deserved, he found the basis for this, not in personal rights as such, but in the refined family to which he really belonged and from which he had inherited his gentle but tough disposition. There is no 'redemption' for the other associates of Fagin, even for Nancy who is the real hero of the story.

Today titles are widely replaced by personal names. The work and the needs of the individual child gain a recognition previously unknown. Privacy has become a major and sensitive issue. The change in general attitude has become unmistakable. It is important to notice here that we are not merely dealing with the working out of the principles of the American and French revolutions. The dictum of John Stuart Mill, 'Each one to count as one, and no one to count as more than one;' crystallised the social vision of the revolutions. This was admirably followed in the Artane system. One suspects that the more contemplative approach to the human person fostered especially by some Jewish writers—Emmanuel Levinas spoke of the epiphany of the face, while Martin Buber analysed the I-Thou relationship—had much more direct influence. With these went striking images of individual women, children and men, frightened and helpless, in regions of war and famine, spread through the world by the new electronic media.

Personal Identity within the Communion of the Church

We have to confess that the Church has not been in the forefront of this development. She has indeed adhered to the principle of the dignity of the person, but concern for order and stability has at times gained precedence over the demands of dignity. Thus we had the anomaly in some Catholic colleges of the staff-members being forbidden to address the students by their Christian names. This is highly relevant to our topic. For the spirit and practice of communion at both the liturgical and social levels in the Church are crucial in the Christian formation of young and old. The foundations of this are laid in Baptism when the candidate receives a new name to mark the radical difference their entry into the Church makes.

It goes without saying that it is the person as such that is the subject of faith, and mem-



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ber of the communion of the Church. The 'heart' is the corresponding biblical expression. There the person is alone with God and hears God's voice addressed to them. It is the centre of personal life, in particular, the centre from which the person enters into relationships with others. Crucial in all personal life is the awareness of self that is present in and accompanies all the activity of the person. The awareness of who one really is, of one's identity, and how it is to be expressed, is the foundation of all spiritual and personal life; it is the guiding factor in the whole of the person's existence. In all this other people play an essential role. Only through my meeting with other people do I enter into an awareness of myself; the face of the mother reflects to the child a sense of self that is confirmed through the personal name. Through interchange with others a person deepens and expands their sense of identity.

This leads to an understanding of the nature and role of the Baptismal name. It identifies this person among others in the communion of the Church. And in the Church the notion of communion, that bond that relates us intimately with the persons of the Trinity and with one another, is to be taken seriously. The Catholic Catechism affirms that it is the deepest vocation of the Church. Sharing in the Eucharist is of course, of quite special importance in this regard. Fr. De Lubac, one of the great theologians of Vatican II, explains that the faithful who communicate enter an agreement to share life in peace. Baptism is

the individual's port of entry into the interpersonal Church-world. It is the baptised, graced person that bears the name; so the name relates to the whole person in the whole of that person's existence. The name enshrines the person in linguistic form so that in it she recognises self and is, in turn, recognised by others; it is a unique means of access by others while participating in the dignity of the person. Sharing in the life of the Church, centrally in the Eucharist, but also in its wider life and mission, brings growth in awareness of Christian identity. Recognition by other members of the Church plays a vital part in that growth.

The Fostering of Christian Growth

On entering the Church the newcomer commits self to the faith, the worship and the discipline of the Church; this commitment is implicitly accepted. But the task of nurturing the person in the faith and nurturing the faith in the person is entrusted to and accepted by the Church, immediately, the local Church. The welcoming of the new member must not be a mere formality or confined to the time of the Baptism. It is the whole atmosphere and ethos of the Church that must be welcoming, an atmosphere and ethos conducive to their maturing in Christ. There are no strangers in the Church of Christ. Through the Christian name the person is identified and recognised. From these will flow courtesy, respect, companionship, and the help needed for full growth in the faith.

We readily recognise that a well-conducted RCIA programme corresponds largely to this vision. But this leaves the question of how those baptised in infancy are to be provided for. It is important that we think of these substantially along the same lines as those in an RCIA programme. We need to pay particular attention to the fact that in every adolescent there is a struggle going on to find self, a search that can indeed be perverted; there is a complex relationship with God that needs to be

brought out into the open for acceptance and encouragement. Only the person who is known and trusted as a genuine friend can expect to have access there. That person needs to bring Christian wisdom and sensitivity to the task. The adoption of the soul-friend of the Celtic tradition would enable and encourage the adolescent to think aloud and frankly on the challenges of the faith as they experience them and to receive friendly counsel

When the binding force of the Friday abstinence was modified, the objection was wisely raised that, apart from participation in the Sunday Eucharist, there was scarcely any practice that marked Catholics in our society. Even the Eucharistic obligation often receives an accommodating interpretation. So the adolescent has few occasions on which they can express publicly their Catholic identity and give witness to it. The more lenient approach to Friday abstinence, while intended to make it easier to practice the faith, has in fact made it more difficult. Another factor has had a doubtful influence as well. When most Catholics were baptised soon after birth there was a relatively strong awareness that their Baptismal name was their name. This was reinforced when a saint's name was adopted. As the sacrament has come to be postponed for long periods after birth the child is well established in their name as a secular name before Baptism.

The Crucial Role of Witness

When the Emmaus disciples recognised Jesus in the breaking of bread they hurried back to the infant Church in Jerusalem to tell them what had happened on the road and how they had witnessed the Risen Lord. The others told them how Jesus had appeared to Simon. This mutual exchange shows witness at work within the Church; the exchange of faith experiences is a sort of life-blood. There is a sincerity that is the hallmark of truthfulness about what one personally knows and can vouch for through witness. It bears the imprint of the Holy Spirit.

The martyr is recognised as the primary witness in the Church. Witness has evidently a special importance in the consolidation and development of the faith in the young. The living expression of faith that is involved gives insight into the functioning of faith, and encourages the wavering.

Witness then is not only a way of coming to know the faith but the way that harmonises with the nature of the Church. It is, however, in tension with, and at times in conflict with, another method held in very high esteem in our culture, the one considered by many as the only secure way of reaching knowledge of any kind, scientific method. For an appreciation of the scope and distinctive virtue of each of these and of the harmony between them is vital in the educational effort. For there is no real conflict.

Scientific method is well represented in the incident in Plato's dialogue, the *Meno*, in which Socrates is showing how it is possible to grow in knowledge. He calls a slave-boy who is presumed to be devoid of all mathematical knowledge, and through a few deft questions leads him through a simple question in arithmetic. Success is based on the following of the right method, and this is open to all, slave and free alike. The paradigm of knowledge is mathematical knowledge, though empirical data in mathematical form will later prove to be all-important. What have no place in this method are the interests, the commitments or personal qualities of the enquirer. Of its nature it is detached and impartial, and free from any personal mark of the person using the method. The fruits of this method cannot be questioned; we enjoy them every moment of the day.

This very evident success makes us expect psychological problems in maintaining the validity and crucial importance of witness in its own quite special sphere. In an appropriate, if commonplace, phrase, the person who witnesses shares self. The whole person, with interests, commitments and distinctive personality, comes into play to a greater or lesser

degree. Most teachers of religion spontaneously share themselves and their own faith in this way as they go about their work. And rational considerations of many kinds have their place in opening up the implications of the faith. But the fact is that education in religion is incorporated into a school programme based on the Platonic model.

The dominant model inevitably colours the mind-set, attitudes and expectations of the students, particularly when the problem is not clearly set before them. Some have seen the answer in the complete incorporation of religious education into the school programme, with its own course material, contact hours and rigorous examination. On the other hand to make no firm demands in terms of the school programme seems bound to lead inevitably to it being trivialised.

Made in God's Image

Traditionally the question of proving God's existence was regarded as one of showing the inadequacy of the world we know without reference to a Creator. Little was said of the existential impact of the answer, especially of a negative answer, for the enquirer. It was as though life could continue substantially as before whether God existed or not.

A very different way of dealing with the issue is to be found in Albert Camus' novel, *The Outsider*. There the implications of the non-existence of God are taken much more seriously at the existential level and questions of great interest to us are brought to light. It is, indeed, a novel, and for this reason demands interpretation. There are no personal names in the book; the hero is simply Meursault, his family name. Camus' general contention is that nothing is of importance. This radically undermines any concern with the question of God or with anything else; Camus seeks to convey this in novel form.

Meursault goes to the vigil and burial of his mother at a rest-home. But he is completely uninvolved and uninterested. Then we find that

the well-arranged obsequies are no more than a charade; there is no reference to the woman being buried; nothing that would set it apart as her funeral. Clearly Camus is conveying that society suppresses the individual person as such and in doing so deprives life of all significance.

But there is a surprising twist which seems to modify this position considerably. In the prison in which Meursault was being held, the line of visitors was kept at a distance of ten paces from the line of prisoners during visiting time. The result was a shouting competition in which no real communication was possible. But the mother of a young prisoner and her son simply looked at one another during the period of visiting; at the end the boy simply said, '*Au revoir, Maman.*' This was certainly not devoid of significance. The message is clearly that life can be significant if a person is willing to live on the margins of society and preserve genuine human relationships. This is the way back to a belief in God.

Camus' novel is of course a cautionary tale. It tells of the emptiness of life when the individual person is ignored. It is relatedness to God and to others that lends significance to our lives, for it is through this that we are made in God's likeness. This is the foundation of the communion of the Church, and of the importance of the Christian name. The growing affirmation of the person is not only a preparation for belief in God, but an affirmation of love; and where love is dwelling God is dwelling. As we have seen, to affirm the individual is to affirm their relatedness to others. Love has many forms and can be very complex in its functioning. There is a grammar of human relationships which governs our social lives, integrates them and preserves their dignity.

As we would expect, these authentic modes of love figure large in the Gospels. Thanksgiving is foundational for an appreciation of what life offers. Trust, fidelity and the

making and keeping of promises, bond people in growing relationships. Through compassion we positively accept one another as sharing the same human condition and being in need of salvation; forgiveness and the healing of relationships flows from compassion. All these at once relate person to person and person in a special way to God.

Our world is more and more dependent on complex systems that lead to ever greater social control. As well, some of the most powerful forces in economics and the media are very happy to manipulate customers, to provide escapist entertainment, and to neutralise searching criticism. What results is the sort of order and uniformity that seem essential for the survival of our world. The problem that the young Catholic must contend with is how to live in this world while being faithful in following the star represented by their Baptismal name.

An interview of a journalist with Bl. Mother Theresa of Calcutta throws some useful light on the problem. The journalist objected that merely lifting up dying individuals from the city streets did not even begin to deal with the entrenched poverty in the city and the vast numbers to be provided for. Her reply was, 'I take each person in need and do what I can for them.'

She and the journalist were not concerned about the same thing. He saw the big picture and wondered how food, clothing and shelter can be provided for all these people in a rational and efficient way. That was an issue that needed to be dealt with urgently. Mother Theresa saw the face of the dying person; she felt called, indeed compelled, to show recognition and respect even when it was 'too late'. But we can draw from Camus that the first must be animated by the second. Otherwise it becomes a complex of empty forms.

There is no substitute for people loving one another. The inspiration provided by Mother Theresa lives on.