

# THE CRUCIFIED CHURCH

By MICHAEL IVENS

THE CATHOLIC MIND draws a firm distinction between martyrdom and all other modes of suffering and death. The note of sadness which hovers over Remembrance Day does not obtrude onto the spirit of Martyrs' Sunday. Yet martyrdom is often hideously painful, and if its commemoration becomes an occasion of uninhibited rejoicing it is because we assent, at least notionally, to the meaning of the cross. To accept the cross is to accept martyrdom as the summit of man's response to the cross. It is therefore natural that in times of relative tranquillity like our own, we should turn for inspiration to episodes of the past, like the elizabethan persecution or the concentration camps, which recapture in some degree the terrible grandeur of calvary.

To do so is not necessarily to depreciate the present, as though the Church were an illustrious military family for which our peacetime world could only be thought of as wanting in opportunity. One can benefit from the martyrs' example without being subject to the sort of ordeal which fills the pages of the martyrology. For martyrdom, viewed in its right perspective, is an object lesson in what the following of Christ really means: the emergence of new life from the sharing of Christ's death. But the danger of misreading the lesson should not be brushed aside. Too much emphasis on the more arresting features – the persecutor as embodiment of the *odium fidei* (hatred of the faith), the staggering physical courage of his victim – can obscure the fact that martyrdom is a witness: a message which may need to be de-coded if it is not to become merely hypnotic.<sup>1</sup> The more widely the conditions of daily christian life diverge from those obtaining in times of persecution, the more the christian needs to be alive to this danger.

In other times the christian could find his daily cross in a type of experience that bore some resemblance to that of the persecuted. The early christian slave imitated Christ by his patience under the

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a slight misreading of the message – quoted without disrespect for a magnificent book – can be detected on the last page of Evelyn Waugh's life of *Edmund Campion*, the english jesuit martyr: 'We are the heirs of their conquest, and enjoy *at our ease* the plenty that they died to win' (Italics mine).

lash.<sup>1</sup> In a less remote past, life in entire sections of our western european society was fraught with suffering, which there was either no means or no will to alleviate. 'Here in thine ear all trustfully, we tell our tale of misery': perhaps for the victorian catholic immigrant this was more than devotional phrase-making. Today, it becomes less and less realistic to think of life in its entirety as miserable, and we feel a deepening malaise about identifying our daily cross with the unhappy moments. Such a view is too reminiscent of parodies of christianity that we reject: the religion denounced by Marx as 'the sigh of the oppressed', or the impoverished piety whose God has degenerated into a *deus ex machina*, 'called in', as Bonhoeffer puts it, 'for the so-called solving of insoluble problems, or as a support in human failure'.

Bonhoeffer lays his finger on an increasingly prevalent difficulty when he goes on: 'I should like to speak of God not on the borders of life but at its centre, not in weakness but in strength, not, therefore, in man's suffering but in his life and his prosperity'.<sup>2</sup> Or to put it more precisely: how do we find in man's prosperity the Lord of the New Testament, who was a sign of contradiction, promised his followers persecution and spoke of discipleship in terms of the cross? Admittedly, it is not everyone's problem. Loneliness, sickness, poverty and mental suffering have not yet been banished from the world. The reminder of the *Imitation of Christ*: 'You shall often be afflicted by your neighbour and what is more, you shall often be a burden to yourself',<sup>3</sup> remains as valid for our own time as for the middle ages. Yet the place of the cross in prosperity and achievement and amid the values of technopolis raises a problem for an increasing number of serious christians committed to a world which cannot be dismissed as a vale of tears. The piety of yesterday does not provide an entirely satisfactory solution.

At first sight, it does provide a partial solution. For the modern christian, with the example of Thomas More or Monsieur de Renty before his eyes, can always make good the want of hardship inherent in his state of life by imposing a little hardship on himself – and this without detriment to worldly success. Yet without denying asceticism its place, we are unhappy about substituting the word asceticism for the word cross: a position which might imply that the important thing is simply to qualify as sufferers, the means being relatively insignificant. There exists a diminishing but still vigorous

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 2, 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters from Prison* (London, 1959), p 91.

<sup>3</sup> Book II, ch 12.

breed whose characteristic is the almost frantic jealousy with which they cling to anything that makes the practice of their religion tough: and such a spirit, while it certainly qualifies as ascetical, will not always be informed by charity. Certainly both voluntary penance (provided, as the decree on the Liturgy reminds us, that it is 'external and social' as well as 'internal and individual',<sup>1</sup>) and the willing acceptance of unlooked-for trials have their place in the christian's daily sharing of the cross. But in order to be more than sporadic and perhaps arbitrary exercises in self-discipline, they need to be grafted onto a more profound crucifixion, which is a continuous, life-giving process. We can become so intent upon certain moments of this process, the occasional penance, the accepted trial, as to overlook the source which alone makes them intelligible – and which at the same time confers new meaning on other areas of christian experience as well.

### *The Cross and Baptism*

The source of our daily crucifixion with Christ, from which any experience that is to be a sharing of the cross must draw its meaning, lies in the daily working-out of our baptism and is, accordingly, implicit in membership of the Church. For by membership of the Church we are committed to confrontation with the world and the flesh. Not of the world: the christian is hated by the world; living by the spirit, he puts to death the deeds of the flesh.<sup>2</sup> The old self, renounced in baptism, is crucified with Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Such language often bears a debased sense, which hardly explains how every christian life is a sharing of the cross and the more christian the life the more profound the sharing. 'World' and 'flesh' are not simply religious words for gross corruption and blatant self-indulgence; we need not be wrestling with the impulse to commit fraud or adultery, or to be foregoing lawful pleasure for the sake of mortification, to be in conflict with the force they designate. For this force is the whole shadow-world that is irreconcilable with Christ; and it is only laid bare in its entirety when subjected to the light of Christ's revelation. 'And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their works were evil'.<sup>4</sup> The world hates Christ because he brings to light the evil in it simply by being what he is.<sup>5</sup> Hence to discover in a particular situation the spirit that is irreconcilable with Christ, it is

<sup>1</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 110.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 15, 19; Rom 8, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Rom 6, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 7, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Jn 7, 7.

not always enough to consult a *summa* of moral theology. It is necessary to be trying to walk in newness of life, open to the spirit which convicts the world of sin.<sup>1</sup> The opposing forces will then emerge in their true colours (and not only as formal sin or as patently unchristian attitudes); and with their emergence the christian will be caught up in the conflict which is his cross.

This cross is never a purely 'private' experience, lending nothing to the community which is inserted into the world as the sacrament of Christ's presence. For the spirit opposed to Christ is active both within and outside us. It would be a mistake to think of the conflict against our private and (we suppose) unseen shortcomings, and our open resistance to the badness around us as carried out on two sides of an impassable frontier. There is continual interaction between the forces within and those without, between the civil war and the war against the outside enemy. Private vice is never really private. It is nurtured by society, and in its turn injures society. For even if – as the saying is – we 'do no harm to our neighbour', our want of genuine holiness means that our neighbour sees only an intermittent flicker where he is meant to see the light of Christ shining in our lives. So our struggle against the world and the flesh always contributes to the visible holiness of the Church, which is a crucified holiness forged in the daily conflict of her members with the powers of darkness.

It is from the standpoint of his baptismal commitment to the world and the flesh that the christian sees the cross in his life for what it is: part of the texture and not an uncomfortable ornament to be pinned on or taken off according to the liturgical season. Two aspects of the contemporary christian experience may serve as illustration: the experience of a changing Church, the experience of being a christian in community. They do not, of course, account for the entire terrain over which the conflict may have to be fought, and they will not always be the points at which the fighting is thickest. For the cross is as general as the situations in which the christian who is attentive to Christ's word will find himself in conflict with the spirit which is not Christ's.

### *The crucified Church*

For St Paul, the works of the flesh include idolatry, the temptation of the religious man to evade the God who reveals himself as judgment on the world by seeking refuge in a comfortable, fireside God

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 16, 8.

made in his own image and likeness.<sup>1</sup> The tendency to accommodate our idea both of God and of the Church to our own instincts is as old as the Church itself. We can fashion for ourselves a God whose demands are limited and predictable, who can be relied upon, in return for certain well-defined dues, to leave undisturbed a familiar and settled relationship. With such a God we enjoy the security of seeing where we stand, of knowing beforehand exactly what is and what is not his will for us; and we are reluctant to acknowledge his hand in anything that disturbs the even tenor of our spiritual lives. This idea of God is reflected in a corresponding idea of the Church. Its hallmark, again, is a certain type of security: security founded, at least in part, on fame, sheer numbers, unshakeable assurance and distinguished converts. Security, the 'peace of God which surpasses all understanding',<sup>2</sup> was also, of course, the distinctive ethos of the apostolic Church. But our constant temptation is to transpose such language to a lower key – as though the peace which the Church receives from Christ were not so different after all from peace as the world-power reckons peace – in terms of some providential exemption from humiliation, misgiving and hardship. 'Who is she that stands triumphant', whatever Aubrey de Vere's intention in writing it, is not to be taken as an ecclesiastical variant of 'Land of Hope and Glory'.

It was to men whose dreams of a political kingdom were about to be shattered that Christ promised peace on the eve of his passion.<sup>3</sup> The future that awaited them offered no alternative brand of worldly security to replace that of the kingdom of their dream. Straightforward persecution was one detail of their prospects, but only one. There were to be other trials, too: wars and rumours of war, internecine strife, false prophets and false christs, the mysterious confusion and disarray announced in prophecies of cosmic upheaval.<sup>4</sup> Affliction would be powerless to disturb their peace: 'For as we share in Christ's suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort, too';<sup>5</sup> but not because christian peace is an escape into impassibility, a stagnant pool in the depths of one's being undisturbed by the storm outside. Far from running away from the hard fact that things are not as he would like them to be, the christian assumes it into his very spiritual experience. His assurance is thus marked off from the 'ego-protection' which is its substitute by an element that

<sup>1</sup> Cf Gal 5, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Phil 4, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Jn 14, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Mt 24, 15ff; Lk 17, 22ff.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 1, 5.

the fugitive from reality most abhors – tension. To be open to God is to endure the tension of continual waiting for a future deliverance. The experience, as described by St Paul, is complex. There is real suffering: the christian, in St Paul's graphic phrase, 'groans inwardly'. He endures in patience and is sustained by hope; yet because he lives in hope, he refuses to take refuge in the false sense of having already arrived.<sup>1</sup>

Among the afflictions to which the apostolic Church was subject, christians of subsequent ages will find some more relevant to themselves than others. Today, we are compelled to discover anew, and in our very experience of the Church, the tension of waiting and the pain of insecurity. It would be easy to develop the point, since a vocabulary has been evolved for the purpose: loss of bearings, spiritual suffering, vocations crisis, crisis of faith (meaning the young), identity crisis (meaning priests and religious), and so on. Easy, but also tedious. Our instinctive reaction is to try to salvage what we can from the collapse of our old security. The means of doing so will differ, according to outlook. One can look for safety by turning backwards. But the spirit of evasion may also be at work on the other side, in the desire to construct a Church of the future as imposing and self-assured in its way as the Church of the past. It may equally inspire the self-pity which is sometimes considered an appropriate response to the present situation: it is so much easier to swoon under the weight of the cross than actually to carry it. Or one can take refuge in indifference, not caring what happens anyway. In each case, one is faced with the craving of the world and the flesh for a peace which Christ did not come to bring. It is by his resistance 'firm in the faith, and knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of our brotherhood throughout the world',<sup>2</sup> that the christian transforms into a patient, yet intensely active, sharing of the cross the pain that arises from his very attachment to the Church.

### *The cross and charity*

Openness to the God who is transcendent implies rejection of the god of the world and the flesh, a god constricted within the limits of the earthly city. Yet too much stress on the transcendence, the otherness, of God may also be prompted by the desire for security. For salvation is worked out in this world, and notably in the experience

<sup>1</sup> Cf Rom 8, 18–25.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 5, 9.

of community. The spiritual combat is not aimed at sheer self-mastery. The christian is liberated from sin in order to be possessed by God; and the sign that God possesses him is the love which he, in turn, extends to others, in imitation, however pale, of Christ's love for him.<sup>1</sup> The works of the Spirit which St Paul opposes to the works of the flesh are mostly community virtues: love, kindness, generosity, forbearance, gentleness and courtesy.<sup>2</sup> By his commitment to renounce the world and the flesh and to walk in newness of life, the christian renounces hostility, obstruction or indifference where the demands of community are concerned. In this renunciation he finds the cross.<sup>3</sup>

It is in his own day and age that the christian has to put into practice the works of the Spirit, to give to charity an effective embodiment. To translate the charity of the New Testament into terms of our present world-consciousness and our western industrial condition demands, of course, serious and informed thinking. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the problems which such thinking has to resolve, or to explore in detail the diverse ways in which the spirit of the world and the flesh may be encountered by the christian as painful opposition. On occasion, he will almost certainly encounter them in persons and institutions. It is unlikely that he will never have to defy convention, never run up against the unyielding barriers of class or race, never have his motives impugned by fellow catholics. More profoundly, he will experience the revolt within himself against the relentless demands of true christian relationships: the striving for genuineness, the forgiveness which takes as its exemplar the mercy of God. For in his very self-giving to others, the christian is brought face to face with the paltriness of his gift; and thus what appears most 'exterior' in his life impels him to intensify, in his innermost self, the crucifixion of what is unregenerate; to discover ever more clearly the mercy of God and his own need for forgiveness.

But to do so, he may need to overcome an obstacle within himself, the resistance of the world and the flesh in a shape known only to the naturally religious. The religious man has his own way of shirking social issues, under the guise of a concern for perfection. The constitution on the Church in the modern world sounds a warning

<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 13, 15; 15, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Gal 5, 22.

<sup>3</sup> 'Undergoing death itself for all sinners, he taught us by example that we, too, must shoulder that cross which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who search after justice and peace'. *Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

against merely individualistic morality, which may stem from 'ignorance of the trend of events', or from laziness.<sup>1</sup> Both the Old and the New Testament testify to the temptation of the religious man to concern himself exclusively with the God he does not see and to neglect his neighbour whom he sees. Reconciliation must precede sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> 'Religion pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the widows and the orphans in their affliction.'<sup>3</sup> Isaiah takes to task the type of worshipper whose ardour in fasting and sacrifice are matched by complete unconcern for the demands of human solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

The religious man needs to take all this to heart if he is not to take refuge from the cross he is asked to carry in an over-rigid demarcation between the sacred and the profane. Our taste for sharp divisions makes us disinclined to engage in a field of action where the issue is not between catholics and non-catholics. To identify the 'world' with the heretic, or at any rate the unbeliever, is a simplification which still commends itself to our sectarian instinct. Again, as Niebuhr remarks, the religious tendency to 'obscure the shades of the moral life by painting only the contrast between the radiance of divine holiness and the darkness of the world' can result in social and political indifferentism.<sup>5</sup> The religious individualist recoils from social commitment that does not involve a 'religious' experience, consoling or mortifying as the case may be. The task of meeting the actual needs of society appears to him distasteful and messy; and he can react, like the priest and levite of the parable, by passing by on the other side for fear of defilement.<sup>6</sup>

The spirit that recoils from the world outside the church door (the catholic church door, that is) has no doubt grown less formidable with the decline of old-fashioned apologetics and 'garden-of-the-soul' other-worldliness. But it is always with us, clouding our vision and concealing from us, if we are not watchful, that the way of the cross passes through the market place; that the forces which obstruct the working out of community – the inner revolt of egotism, the outside pressures from society, even the indifference or hostility of the religious – are forces which we are committed to resisting because we are committed to die to the flesh, to be crucified to the world and to walk in newness of life.

Hence, in his painful struggle to make a better world, just as in his

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Mt 5, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Jas 1, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Isai 58.

<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold: *Moral man and immoral society* (London, 1933), pp 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> Lk 10, 25-37.

painful acceptance of the predicament of the Church, however different and unconnected the two experiences may appear to be, the christian finds at the centre of life the cross: the same cross which a profound instinct that canonizes the martyrs and looks for inspiration towards the persecuted tells him he ought to find. Strictly speaking, he does not suffer persecution. But he will still recognize in the lineaments of the Church's most recent self-portrait a reflection of his own emerging new life in Christ:

The Church, like a pilgrim in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of our Lord until he comes. By the power of the risen Christ she is given power to overcome patiently and lovingly the afflictions and hardships which assail her from within and without, and to show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at last it will be revealed in total splendour.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 8.