THE CROSS AND THE CHURCH

By SIMON TUGWELL

'AND THEN he looked up to heavenward and saw the sign of the cross shining right clear with great light, and there was written above with letters of gold, Thou shalt overcome thine enemies by this sign'. So did a fifteenth-century friar (a 'sinful wretch' as he calls himself; we know nothing else about him) pass on to his contemporaries from Blessed Jacopo de Voragine the legend of how Constantine came to be converted. The historical truth of the tale is controverted, but there is no doubt that this story gave an immense fillip to christian devotion to the cross. And this devotion was entirely triumphalist. *Ecce crucem Domini, fugite partes adversae* ('behold the cross of the Lord, take flight, all you enemies'). The cross is the royal banner, heading the triumphal procession of the victorious Christ.

At first, naturally enough, while crucifixion was still a practical possibility, such devotion to the cross as there was, was essentially ordered to martyrdom. This is what we find in the legends surrounding the execution of St Andrew. And, as a natural development from this, and entirely in accordance with our Lord's own teaching, people took to asceticism as a way of being 'crucified to the world'. St Pachomius is especially associated with this development, and he adopted and taught the practice of praying with one's arms outstretched in the form of a cross. We are to die with Christ; his cross is our model. Daily we are to take up our cross and follow him.

But while Pachomius was inculcating this kind of asceticism of the cross, St Antony was, apparently, already using the sign of the cross as a sign of power, to be used against temptations and demonic onslaught. (It had, of course, even earlier been customary to use the sign of the cross as a kind of 'sealing' for Christ, especially in the rites of christian initiation.) Crucifixes showed our Lord in triumph; *regnavit a ligno Deus* – God reigning from the cross. Accounts of Calvary were martial in character, stressing our Lord's victory even to the exclusion, sometimes, of his suffering. In *Piers Plowman*, most famously, it is presented as a highly successful bit of jousting. In the old english *Dream of the Rood*, Christ is a hero in the prime of youth and vigour, completely in command of the whole situation.

In accordance with this view, the sign of the cross and images of the crucifix came to be regarded as a major weapon in the believer's arsenal. In exorcism, for instance, a crucifix still plays an important part. It is *per sanctae crucis mysterium* (through the mystery of the holy cross), that, in the dominican order, water is blessed with a relic of St Vincent Ferrer 'for healing the sick, strengthening the weak, raising up the dejected, and purifying the unclean'. St Dominic, who, like St Francis, revived the practice of cruciform praying, regarded it as especially powerful and only used it 'when he knew by God's inspiration that some great miracle was going to occur by virtue of his prayer'.

However, by this time a new element had been introduced into devotion to the cross. In the early middle ages people began to turn more to the idea of our Lord's sufferings; crucifixes began to show him no longer reigning in triumph from the tree, but suffering the pangs of torture and death on a gallows designed to produce maximum discomfort. Implausibly enough, the text about the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head was interpreted to mean that on the cross he had no head-piece. English writers, inspired by local climatic conditions, supposed a bitter cold wind to be blowing. In general, everything was done to make the whole thing out to be as agonizing as possible.

Unlike the sound New Testament tradition of regarding our Lord's suffering as the model of christian patience and mortification, the point of this new devotion was rather to stir up the hearts of the faithful to an affective involvement with the person of Jesus. In a way that previously had been commoner in the christian east than in the west, devotion to the humanity of Christ, Jesus-centred spirituality, was coming into vogue.

In part, this was obviously a very healthy reaction against a kind of christianity that had, frankly, become too successful. Majesty was enthroned, but it was no longer recognizable as the majesty of him who was 'humble and meek', who loved us and gave himself for us, who exhorted his followers, 'Blessed are the poor'. Just as men suddenly began to long for evangelical poverty and simplicity in their own lives, so they rediscovered the poverty and simplicity of their Lord and Saviour.

But there were dangers. A strong belief in the victory of Christ keeps alive a sense of dependence on him, of being able to lean on him; a sense that he actually makes a difference to things, whether in the dramatic form of miracles, or more hiddenly in the transformation of men's hearts and morals and attitudes. A spirituality that stresses rather the weakness and poverty and humiliation of Christ can easily turn into pelagianism, that heresy which has, in any case, never been far from western christendom. Christ, instead of being to us the power and righteousness of God, becomes just an example, though an inspiring one, of fortitude, and the object of our deep, compassionate love. And it is, tacitly, now up to *us* to see to it that our lives are transformed. A door was opened to an oppressively moralistic kind of religion, and a spirituality that could be called, not too unfairly, 'hallucinatory' (by Aldous Huxley in *Grey Eminence*), making Christ a matter of past history and present pious imagination, rather than a living actuality today, yesterday, and for ever.

And correspondingly with this, the attitude to miracles changes. Miracles continue to be regarded as an essential part of the Church (they are still given as one of the signs of the true Church for instance in the fifteenth century dominican John of Ragusa's *Summa on the Church*): and they continue, indeed, to occur in every age. But people become suspicious of them. Richard Rolle, in other ways so much the typical enthusiast, regards miracle-working as simply showing off, a sign of spiritual immaturity. Aelred of Rievaulx warns against 'the temptation to prove your worth by working miracles'. People in general, and the clergy in particular, cease to expect miracles. A classic sign of this is the treatment of the sacrament of the sick: although physical healing continued to be part of its theory (those who denied it were anathematized by Trent), nevertheless its actual practice showed that healing was not really expected to occur.

One aspect, not to say cause, of this is surely that the Church had come to rely less and less on spiritual power, the power of Christ, and more and more on secular support. A little story told about St Dominic sums up the situation. Dominic was being shown round by the Pope. Indicating all his treasures, the Pope remarked: 'Peter can no longer say, Silver and gold have I none, St Dominic replied: 'Nor can he say, Stand up and walk'. It is dangerous for the Church to be too successful, however supernatural the origins of her success; almost inevitably success divorces her from her true foundations.

An equally sad result of all this is that religion becomes something so 'inward' that it no longer really affects anybody. It becomes a hobby rather than a way of life. The elimination of the sense of the power of Christ over all situations, physical and spiritual, tends to relegate him to an ever narrower domain in people's lives. No longer playing a rôle in the drama, he becomes simply an ever-present and normally forgotten backcloth. No longer the Lord of all, he becomes the lord of Sundays only. The cross becomes consolation for the afflicted, or at least conversation for their visitors, rather than a power to change the world.

The whole question of power has come sharply back into the limelight in recent decades. On the one hand, the convergence of scientism and romanticism towards the end of the last century produced an unprecedented interest in para-normal phenomena; on the other hand, the pentecostals set miracles much to the forefront in their 'full gospel', and in the past fifty years or so the effect of their challenge has been increasingly felt throughout the whole of christendom.

A book that contributed perhaps more than any other to recent interest in pentecostalism is David Wilkerson's *The Cross and the Switchblade*, which, having been a best-seller for over ten years, has now been made, as they say, into 'an inspiring motion picture'.[1] This book was one of the factors in the beginnings of the Catholic Pentecostal Movement in the United States, a movement which has by now attracted so much publicity that, for better or worse, it is increasingly difficult and imprudent to ignore it.

The story of *The Cross and the Switchblade* is by now known to nearly everyone: how a raw country pastor of a new remote pentecostal parish followed the call of God to New York, where he was led – miraculously and at great personal cost – into contact with some of the roughest, toughest kids in the whole world; and how the holy Spirit worked through him to transform their lives, converting them, getting them off dope, ridding them of hate and violence, and (this part of the gospel is spelled out more clearly elsewhere than in this particular book) in general making them into good United States citizens. This was the beginning of a huge and now international apostolate, obviously one of the forces behind the Jesus People. The power of the gospel (and very much a gospel of power) is called into play against the power of heroin, compulsive sex, gang violence, teenage delinquency, and so on. More candid in this than some pentecostals, Wilkerson does not claim a hundred per cent success; but clearly there is a call here to which a great many young people,

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[1] Wilkerson, D.: *The Cross and the Switchblade* (London, 1967).

perhaps especially the social misfits among them, respond with enthusiasm.

I think one would have to be incredibly hard-hearted not to be moved by this book. I am not ashamed to admit that it has brought tears to my eyes (and, incidentally, Wilkerson, probably quite unaware, places exactly the same emphasis on tears, and for exactly the same reasons, as did the christian monks of east and west right up to the end of the middle ages). For all my reservations about pentecostalism as a system and as a movement, I have no hesitation in rejoicing greatly in what the Lord is doing through David Wilkerson, as it is told to us in this book.

What alarms me somewhat, if I can put it this way, is what he is *not* doing; what pentecostalism systematically prevents him from doing.

I think we must admit that recent catholic spirituality made it hard for people to expect miracles. Sick people are specifically discouraged very often from looking for healing at God's hand. For instance, the St Thomas More Centre's little booklet on visiting the sick makes the excellent suggestion that we should pray with the sick: but adds that we should not look for miracles. This is flatly contrary to the express teaching of scripture: 'if anyone is sick, let him send for the elders of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up'.[2] A Church Council at Pavía in 850 reminded the clergy to preach this to their people.

On the other hand, pentecostal spirituality can make it very hard for people to accept suffering. They can even be made to feel guilty if they are not healed.

Yet even in New Testament times not everyone was healed. 'Trophimus I left sick', writes St Paul.[3] Our gospel must be full enough to contain both the power and the weakness. And it is surely not helpful to suggest, as Agnes Sanford has done, that it is only saints who can claim to be suffering legitimately with Christ, as if penal suffering and redemptive suffering were two different things. There is only one burden of suffering, and this is the burden of sin: personal, accumulated, collective and original sin. This is the burden our Lord carried, it is the burden we too must carry, in whatever way it is given or permitted to us. Such suffering, like the sin which caused it, is a bad thing (this must be made quite clear, as it

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[2] Jas 5, 14ff.

[3] 2 Tim 4, 20.

is often misunderstood); we can and should pray to be delivered from it. But the final deliverance is eschatological, part of the kingdom. We must resist two erroneous positions: that of supposing that 'the resurrection has already taken place',[4] and that therefore we should expect to be freed straight away from all sickness; and that of denying that we already taste 'the powers of the age to come'.[5]

Tied as so many of us have been to a religion so inward and 'spiritual' as to be quite unreal, it is a tremendous joy to rediscover a sense of God's power coming down into every corner, however fleshly, of human experience; and the immediate awareness of God actually doing things in particular situations is a welcome liberation from that dull old God who was known only in general, not to say abstract, terms (a God, dare one say it?, imagined rather than experienced).

But we must try to learn from past experience, and not simply build ourselves another, more exciting, but maybe all the more secure, prison. We have already noticed that the Church can be too successful, and this is a hazard already apparent in some pentecostal circles. The healing power of the gospel can make people too comfortable, and then where do they go from there? The Lord not only healed the sick, he also cursed the rich in no uncertain terms. We have to beware of the gospel prospering in such a way as to oust 'blessed are the poor'. Neither must we forget that poverty of spirit which our Lord also commends. It is possible to build spiritual barns to hoard our spiritual harvest in; and eventually the Lord gets left out. Hollenweger's magisterial and fascinating book, *The Pentecostals*, shows, with deepest sympathy, how pentecostalism tends to do itself out of business with extraordinary rapidity.[6] It seems to be a divine rule that God will always turn up precisely where you do not expect him; and the churches, without fail, keep trying to capture him and overlook this rule. The pentecostals are no exception. Pentecostals, like the rest of us, have constantly to re-learn the wild freedom of God, 'leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills', constantly bidding us 'forget what lies behind . . . look, I am doing a new thing!'

Pentecostals, like the rest of us, are not always ready to move on with God. And a spirituality like theirs, emphasizing signs and wonders, is exposed to particular dangers, which we should be aware of (without getting panicky).

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4 2 Tim 2, 18. 5 Heb 6, 4.

6 Hollenweger, Walter J.: *The Pentecostals* (London, 1972).

Signs and wonders can easily set us a false sense of security, a false criterion of success. No outward phenomenon, however exotic, however impressive, carries within itself any guarantee that all is well. Even miracles worked in the name of the Lord do not necessarily indicate that one is headed for salvation.[7] Miracles without charity are worthless.[8] Miracles attend the anti-Christ as well as the Christ[9]. That is to say, 'powers' *(dynameis)* are highly ambiguous: they may be part of Christ's work – and the bible should leave us in no doubt that they are an essential part of his work, an indispensable attestation, even, of the lordship of Jesus. On the other hand, they may be part of the propaganda of the anti-Christ; or they may be simply irrelevant. There is a story in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* of a brother fasting and praying for seven years to receive a certain spiritual gift. At last he got it! Off he went to his director, pleased as punch. 'It doesn't suit you', said his director; 'now go back and pray for seven more years that it will be taken away again'. Similarly it is told of St Vincent Ferrer that once he saw a dumb woman making signs to him. 'What do you want?' he asked her. Her tongue was loosened, and she replied: 'I want my speech restored'. 'You would only make bad use of it', he answered, and so her tongue was bound again. Perhaps we can apply St Paul's dictum here: 'not everything is expedient'. Miracles may sometimes be quite feasible, but not appropriate. It is not enough to judge outwardly; we must not be over-impressed by outward phenomena, whether to approve or to condemn.

There is another danger: that of setting our sights too low. I suppose it is a natural human tendency to find a problem that one can solve, and then solve it. And thank God that someone can make even a beginning in solving the problem of drug addiction and teenage violence. But there is a danger in solving problems too efficiently: we can use soluble problems as a way of evading the challenge to go on growing ourselves, to press on to perfection, as we are bidden in scripture. Catholics are all too familiar with this kind of thing. Haven't we seen far too much catholicism concerned only with appearances (conversion statistics, mass attendances, bingo money, and that's it)? Pentecostalism has its own version of the same thing, connected especially with their doctrine of 'baptism in the holy Spirit', attested by speaking in tongues.[10] This being

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[7] Mt 7, 21ff. [8] 1 Cor 13. [9] Mt 24, 24ff.

[10] For a fuller critique of this doctrine, see my two-part article in *The Heythrop Journal* (1972). Cf also Arnold Bittlinger, 'Baptised in Water and the Spirit', in '*The Baptism in*

presented as 'the fulness of the holy Spirit', it is hardly surprising that many people feel that 'now they have got it', and all that remains is to go out and convert everybody else. This reinforces a danger inherent in any sudden religious experience (pointed out, for instance, by St Bernard in his 18th sermon on the Canticle): not waiting to be integrated in ourselves by the inward work of the holy Spirit, we rush out to do good to others, and as likely as not succeed only in doing them harm. In a fascinating article, reprinted in M.O'C. Walshe's *Essays from the Wheel*, the american buddhist Dr Burns points out that in any kind of *satori* or conversion-experience, what seems to happen is that a well-formed *persona* emerges from beneath, driving underground what was previously the dominant character.[11] The 'new man' ousts the old, but does not effectively neutralize or integrate him. And the old man will in due course take vengeance; he will show himself in all kinds of compulsive attitudes and activities, often in the form of rigid hostility to all that the person previously stood for. This is, of course, the classic formula for producing the most persecuting kind of pressure group – the formula of pharisaism, in fact. A posture of religious success, covering up a basic insecurity and lack of integration within, by crossing land and sea to make converts.

Wilkerson's book smacks throughout only of honesty and integrity; but others are not all so straightforward. And there are a great many young people now very prone to addiction of one kind or another, lusting to be dominated: what could be easier than for an ambitious evangelist to dominate them? It would be tragic to emerge, at long last, from the old triumphalism we all deplore so vocally, only to leap straight into the new variety, to unhook people from heroin only to entrap them into an addictive state of religion.

This is the danger, it seems to me, of 'charismatic renewal', a danger to which neo-pentecostals are doubly exposed. It is part of the joy of classic pentecostalism that (as George Canty puts it in *In my Father's House*, he being an unmitigated pentecostal) 'Pentecost is far more than a charismatic renewal . . . if truth is one whole, then pentecostal truth should help us to see truth – it should provide new strands of unity for all christian belief'.[12] Canty celebrates with

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the holy Spirit as an ecumenical problem (Charismatic Renewal Service, Inc., 1972). For a positive evaluation of tongues, see my book, *Did you receive the Spirit?* (London, 1972).

11 Burns, D. M.: 'Nirvana, Nihilism and Satori', in *Pathways of Buddhist Thought, essays from the Wheel*, ed. Ven Nyanaponika, selected by M. O'C. Walshe (London, 1971).

12 Canty, George: *In my Father's House; Pentecostal Expositions of the Major Christian Truths* (London, 1969).

immense vivacity the joyous freedom of God to be anywhere and everywhere, to be at home on Blackpool beach as well as in church. I think it is one of the most remarkable achievements of the original pentecostals that they did attain to a real sense of christian wholeness. We shall betray them utterly, quite apart from other considerations, if we only pick up from them a 'charismatic renewal'. What the Church needs above all is that kind of simplicity and wholeness that comes from looking in everything straight at God, from a singleness of attention and purpose towards him.

This expansiveness, this openness to wholeness in our personal lives, expresses and makes effective an essential characteristic of the Church catholic, as the *germen unitatis*, the seed of unity, in the world. The Church can never be true to her divine calling if she is content to be a *haeresis* – a sect, a movement. On the cross Christ reconciled *all things*, breaking down the barriers of division; the cross is his instrument for the *apocatastasis*, the restoration of the whole creation. This means that the Church needs constantly to be reminded of elements of the wholeness that she had fogotten or overlooked; but unless these elements are brought in in such a way as to serve the wholeness, however commendable they may be in themselves, their final effect is only to the glory of the Enemy.

I doubt whether pressure groups and movements, however laudable their objectives, help much in the long run towards the unity and wholeness for which Christ died. However much they appeal to the power of the cross, in fact they end up by denying the cross. We shall do far more, surely, if we allow the cross to become imprinted in our hearts, so that we can die truly to ourselves, letting our hearts be 'softened' by compassion and devotion to Christ crucified, allowing ourselves to be truly poor with him and for him; and then letting him work whatever wonders he will, knowing that they come from him and go back to him in glory. With St Paul, we shall then be able to say: 'I can do all in him who strengthens me. I know how to abound, and how to be poor'.[13] Then, whether we succeed or whether we fail, whether we shine impressively before men or seem rather to be as nothing, we shall not be abashed, knowing that 'it is Christ who died, or rather, Christ who was raised and is at the right hand of God, he it is who intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come . . . nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'.[14]

[13] Phil 4, 12ff.

[14] Rom 8, 34ff.