

THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

By G. H. EARLE

LAST TUESDAY, at a governors' meeting,¹ I spent much of the day talking about the future of one particular catholic school. On my way home I crossed Oxford Street in the heart of London, and heard the rhythmic chant of the supporters of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Drums, cymbals, dance, the constant repetition of the same words, release these young people from the servitude of smoking, drinking, drugs, sex, careerism, and offer them the immediate joy and energy of communion with the Transcendent Being. The experience is so powerful that they are soon prepared to spend hours in prayer and even to become full-time devotees. They listen attentively to their spiritual master, they study obscure and apparently irrelevant writings, they are prepared to go anywhere to persuade others to share their way of life. They give up their jobs, they lose their friends, they are thought to be mad. They are poor, they are chaste, they are obedient, they are fanatical, they are happy.

I looked back over the day I had just spent with a group of celibates, whose average age is in the fifties, whose recent and direct contact with young people is limited, and wondered what we had talked about. We are members of the Society of Jesus and in our reserved, embarrassed, english way we can proclaim 'Jesus loves me!', just as the devotees in Oxford Street shout 'hare krishna'. We are convinced that this catholic school, which is worth so much of our time, was founded and exists to spread the word of God. We started our deliberations with a prayer. But somehow we spent most of our time talking about money and organization, and never got around to such important questions as: Do the boys react with enthusiasm to the challenge of Christ? Do they pray?

¹ I happen to be a governor of several catholic schools; that is why I am writing as a governor. I recognize that parents and teachers have a great deal more influence as educators. I realize, too, that some governors are mere hyphens set between dioceses, religious orders, local education authorities and the various agents who affect a school from within and without. I am assuming that many governors do take their responsibilities seriously or at least want to do so.

Now I began to think about a week during which I had spent much of my time reading, thinking, writing and talking about the future of several catholic schools. Here again the most frequent topic was money. I do not want to give the impression that governors are misers or frustrated bankers. You do need a lot of money nowadays to get the right sort of buildings in the right place. Simple jobs like running up a gymnasium or closing the three-mile gap between the lower and the upper school are surprisingly expensive. Teaching, administrative and domestic staffs, if there are enough of them and they possess the desirable qualities, cost a great deal of money. Bringing accommodation up to date, providing good facilities, buying books, furniture and equipment, all eat into limited supplies of income and capital. Organization, inside and outside the schools, absorbed a good deal of our attention. Inside the school, the headmaster, his deputies and the staff must achieve a nice balance of freedom and order. Outside the school, due weight must be given to parents, governors, parishes, dioceses, local education authorities, the surrounding community. A school after all does not generate its own pupils or educate them for its own purposes. If we spend too much time on finance and organization we realize that we might just as well be running a canning factory. We must correct our vision and gaze at genuinely educational problems. The first of these is the selection of our pupils. Are we to increase the chances of the privileged few or are we going to educate all who come regardless of their ability and desire to learn? Most of us have chosen the second alternative, and so have the problem of doing justice both to the gifted and to the unpromising. This presents major problems of staffing, curriculum and method. It is difficult enough to get a staff which is qualified, competent and keen to teach a wide range of subjects; it seems almost impossible to get enough teachers who can collaborate with their colleagues, who can easily cross the barriers into other subjects, who can create classes based on the pupils' experiences, and who can persuade the children to use their own talents and energies.

When we can get as far as this, we have every reason to be pleased with ourselves. We have achieved what catholic schools have been trying to do for so long; we can say with pride that we are as good as our rivals or better. But our delight in contemplating these model junior, comprehensive or public schools is spoiled by one awkward question: What is it that makes our schools distinctively catholic? We must answer this question if we are to look into the future of

catholic schools. We could say that the buildings and grounds belong to this diocese or that religious order; that x per cent of the pupils and y per cent of the staff are catholics. This is hardly more satisfying than a recital of the maths or games results. We have to get behind the appearances and see why the diocese should keep this school going or why parents should choose a catholic school; questions which are increasingly urgent when dioceses are faced with rising costs and parents are becoming more discriminating. Governors, I take it, are responsible for seeing that a school is catholic, continues to be catholic and goes into the future becoming more catholic. Governors of a military academy ought to see that they turn out soldiers, and governors of a catering school ought to see that they turn out cooks. Do governors of catholic schools worry much about whether they are turning out catholics? We should not be too surprised or censorious as we listen to their hesitant answer.

Until recently, passing on the faith did not present a serious problem. It could be left to parents, experts and the unquestioned authorities and traditions of a highly disciplined social group. Governors are intelligent, conscientious and well-intentioned people. They can understand that it is not as easy as it was to teach religion. They can learn about the new religion syllabus; they can help to meet the need for more and better religion teachers; they could make it easier for the school to have improved retreats; they could give their approval to a programme of community service, and take an interest in the number of deprived people helped by the boys and girls; they could ask searching questions about counselling and pastoral care in the school.

I boarded the train home thinking that it was not going to be so difficult to persuade governors to plan the religious future of their schools much as they had planned the administrative, financial and architectural future. It only meant getting them to learn a little about religious education and to concentrate on it more than in the past. But the drums and the chant of the hare krishna enthusiasts were still beating in my head, and forcing me to ask whether their religion was more real than ours. The past is full of warnings that it is possible to balance the books, erect magnificent buildings, streamline organization, clarify laws and strengthen their application, write fine works of learned and popular theology, preach eloquent sermons, mount impressive ritual, and still miss the point of religion. Love God and love your neighbour; that is what our religion is trying to teach and to practise. The two facets of the one command-

ment are not as simple as they sound. God loves us; his love is embodied in Jesus Christ and then in us by the gift of God's love poured into our hearts.² With this self-same love we answer God and go out to other people as individuals and as a community that worships and serves.

Since you are God's dear children you must try to be like him. Your life must be controlled by love just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us.³ . . . Now I tell you: love your enemies . . . You must be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.⁴ A new commandment I give you: love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another. If you have love for one another then all will know that you are my disciples.⁵

A relationship with God in which we are changed and become more like God: that is real religion; that is what the Church, as Christ's body, should be trying to foster; that is the inner life and ultimate purpose of a catholic family, a religious community or any institution which intends to be an organic part of the catholic Church. I can conceive that a school might be efficient in the transmission of information about religion, admirable in its academic, sporting and disciplinary standards, and still fail to be catholic in this sense. Do the governors, the parents, the staff and the pupils love one another as Christ loved us? From the observation of this love do outsiders know that we are his disciples? How catholic is this school at present and how can it become more catholic in the future?

During the past few years I have worked on governing bodies with men and women of unquestionable idealism and dedication. Their charity was often heroic and shone through in the intensity of their work and the magnanimity of their judgements. And yet they were not asking these questions. The heart of Christ was not sufficiently in touch with and directing their work for the schools. When I asked myself why this was so, I heard once again the beating of the drums. The young people in Oxford Street thought that their singing and dancing put them in direct contact with their God. For so long we have been dependent on the difficult reflections of philosophers and theologians, or the esoteric words and gestures of extraordinary men called priests and prophets, that we are liable to regard this claim as curious and dangerous. I do not wish to sweep philosophers, theologians, priests and prophets out of existence; but

² Rom 5,5.

³ Eph 5, 1-2.

⁴ Mt 5, 44-8.

⁵ Jn 13, 34-5.

equally I hope we are not going to think that what they have to say is the sum of all truth and reality. We are in danger of becoming like people who find it far more fascinating to listen to a lecture on dietetics or to study the accounts of an institute of food technology than simply to enjoy food. Having invented our third-hand religion, we desperately try to make it relevant: hence the soup-kitchens and the sociology. As we wander further and further away from real religion, we are bound to consider those who persist in trying to remain in contact with God as eccentric and rather contemptible. Who on earth reads *The Way*? Have we forgotten that religion is a relationship? Have we forgotten:

This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and teach his brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord.⁶

And this is eternal life: for men to know you, the only true God and to know Jesus Christ, whom you sent.⁷

We do not know simply because someone in authority has told us, nor do we know because we have followed an argument or acknowledged an historical fact, though I do not deny that these forms of knowledge have their place. We know as one person knows another person; we know with varying degrees of immediacy, intimacy and depth; we know with a range of intellectual, emotional and physical reactions; we know in our states of frustration, fear, boredom, or exultation.

The future of catholic schools must lie in this direction: towards a direct and exclusive relationship with God; otherwise the religion they transmit will be mere theory or social welfare. This path can be called a life of prayer. In their strange way the Hare Krishna devotees are trying to lead a life of prayer. Much of *The Way* is intended to assist prayer. What are our governors going to do about it? I suspect that our brows will furrow and that we shall answer: Yes, what can we do to make sure that our schools teach prayer more effectively? We may note with relief that there is a recent article in *The Way Supplement*, on 'Teaching Prayer'.⁸ We must get our headmasters and heads of religious education departments to

⁶ Jer 31, 33-4.

⁷ Jn 17, 3.

⁸ Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 22 (Summer 1974).

read it and discuss it with their colleagues. If so, we shall have shown once again how strong is our instinct to shy away from reality. Prayer is above all things something we must do for ourselves. Only those who speak from personal experience can speak with any authority at all, and only they can avoid the double charge of hypocrisy: that lips and hearts are not at one and that we want to lay burdens on others which we are not willing to carry ourselves. If governors want to speak with confidence to their partners in the schools, and lead them towards a relationship with God, they must themselves pass through and learn from this series of experiences which we call the life of prayer.

Sooner or later we have to learn from experience that prayer is extraordinarily difficult. Either we never seriously begin to pray, or, having begun and carried on for some time, we stop because we do not seem to be getting anywhere. Years of prayer, far from making for greater facility, seem merely to emphasize our own incompetence. From this painful experience of our impotence we can so easily learn the wrong lesson and adopt the wrong solution. We can give up what seems such an unprofitable exercise. Or we can experiment with well-tried or novel methods of prayer which we hope will help us to control our relationship with God. We are such fools that we do not learn the obvious lessons: we cannot pray; we are like little children who have to be taught everything; we have to have everything, even the desire to pray, put into our hands. God is the master of our relationship with him. We cannot manipulate God as we would manipulate a telephone or a foreign language. Only the feeling of paralysis can put meaning into familiar words; we pray by the power of the holy Spirit through Jesus Christ.

'He went to a far country'.⁹ We have an impression of the immense distance between ourselves and God. God is a stranger to us and we are strangers to him. A relationship with other human beings, even when we think we know them well, is impenetrable enough. God is a unique, utterly different, remote person. We therefore have an experience of strangeness and estrangement, which can come to us from many different angles. The temple or the church can talk to us of God's remoteness in sweet smells, weird figures, foreign languages, dramatic costumes, movements and sounds. We can sometimes be taken right out of the ordinariness of furniture, shops, cars, work and people by a wonderful sky, a violent storm,

⁹ Lk 15, 13.

beautiful music, an expanse of silence or the feeling of being at one with other people. Today we all breathe the air of unbelief, whether we call ourselves agnostics or atheists or whether we just behave as though God did not exist. If we pay attention we may have an acute sense of God's absence.

'Here I am about to starve. I will get up and go to my Father'.¹⁰ When the experience of exile is strong enough we begin to yearn for home. Often we have to be uprooted from our comfortable insertion in a foreign land to return to a far-away God by an event which may at first sight seem a disaster. It may be failure in the work we once did so well; it may be the loss of a limb or of a dear friend; it may be the utter pointlessness of our lives. Gradually or abruptly we come to realize that we are hungry, thirsty, blind, deaf, paralysed, enslaved, helpless, dying. We turn away from the pain within us to the Father who is waiting for us and experience conversion. We experience a first taste of a desire for union with God which will only be complete at the end of a long road, a desire nevertheless so demanding that other desires have to be subordinated to it. It is easy for the convert's single-mindedness to run away into fanaticism. He thinks that his journey is over and not just beginning. Extremes of solitude, of silence, of eccentricity, of hardship, of insensitivity to others seem to be needed to emphasize the violence of the break with the past and the claims of an all-sufficient, all-demanding God. Conversions, when they are repeated a second, a third and an 'n'th time, are no less resolute, but gentler and more unobtrusive. With conversion there is a growing sense of direction and unity. We know that we are moving towards God, and the diverse aspects of our lives take their place in the accomplishment of his plan for us.

'You were foreigners and did not belong to God's chosen people... You lived in this world without hope and without God. But now in union with Christ Jesus you who used to be so far away have been brought near by the death of Christ'.¹¹ The desire expressed in the moments of conversion can only change into reality by passing through the experience of Christ. 'I am the door. Whoever comes in by me will be saved'.¹² The first experience is one of undeserved love: the stranger, the outcast and the enemy are forgiven and healed; they are invited to come ever closer to Christ in their thoughts and feelings; they are asked to become his active partners.

¹⁰ Lk 15, 17-18.

¹¹ Eph 2, 12-13.

¹² Jn 10, 9.

As our union with Christ grows, we begin to experience the Incarnation through which the unfamiliar word of God (A) is at home in the familiar world of our everyday lives (B), and thus illuminates everyday events and unites them with his own purpose and achievement (C):

- A. While they all watched, the man got up, picked up his mat and hurried away. They were all completely amazed and praised God saying: We have never seen anything like this.¹³
They were terribly afraid and began to say to each other: Who is this man? Even the wind and the waves obey him.¹⁴
- B. Your mother and your brothers are outside and they want you.¹⁵
There was a man who went out to sow.¹⁶
While they were eating Jesus took the bread.¹⁷
- C. Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? He looked over the people sitting around him and said: Look! Here are my mother and my brothers. For the person who does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother.¹⁸
The sower sows God's message.¹⁹
Take it, he said, this is my body.²⁰

Touched by the word of God, ordinary people with ordinary thoughts, feelings, problems, choices are never ordinary again. They are either going with Jesus to his Father or with Judas into the dark: the darkness of confusion which can so easily become the darkness of evil. 'Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: The Son of Man must suffer much . . . and after three days he will be raised to life'.²¹ 'Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter his glory'.²² Following Christ must lead to an experience of death and resurrection with Christ. This is a conflict with the powers of darkness in which we pass through a disconcerting revolution. We find victory in defeat, joy in suffering, courage in fear, hope in despair, strength in weakness, wisdom in folly, faith in doubt, life in death. The cross and resurrection do not merely teach a lesson: the lesson is an event, which takes place in the life of Christ and in our lives. It is the lesson that God's love triumphs in a man. We desperately want God's love and instinctively reject it. Our instincts, therefore, have to be frequently and painfully broken on the cross we bear with Christ. Our mediocrity, inertia, wrong-headedness and malice, and our battles with the mediocrity, inertia,

¹³ Mk 2, 12.¹⁴ Mk 4, 41.¹⁵ Mk 3, 32.¹⁶ Mk 4, 3.¹⁷ Mk 14, 22.¹⁸ Mk 3, 33-5.¹⁹ Mk 4, 14.²⁰ Mk 14, 22.²¹ Mk 8, 31.²² Lk 24, 25.

wrong-headedness and malice of others, become the field from which the seed of God's love can flower a hundredfold.

'The Helper, the holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you'.²³ Our growing awareness of an absent God, our growing need to come closer to him, our growing union with Jesus Christ, these are all the work of the teacher within us, who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. He it is who makes Christ's words and deeds present and active within us. Without him we are only more or less interested or accurate historians and textual critics. He gives us the clarity of vision and determination of will to make sure that our decisions are God's will: 'For the holy Spirit and we have agreed . . .'²⁴ He maintains the balance and the interaction between contemplation and action, prayer and decision, which prevent us from becoming mere dreamers or mindless executors. He teaches us to speak and listen to our brothers and sisters in the Church, whether they are members of the hierarchy, prophets, poets or the people next to us at a meeting. He helps us to build up the inner strength of the communion of saints, and so to go out energetically, enthusiastically and imaginatively to talk to unbelievers in their own language.

The sketch map which began as the life of prayer, and ended as the work of the holy Spirit within us, can now be seen as the intersection and conjunction of several paths:

- 1 God's loving plan for us;
- 2 revealed and put into effect by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- 3 and carried on throughout the centuries in the teaching and activities of Christ's body.
- 4 Our own religious, social, political, economic, cultural and psychological situations, in all their diversity and complexity, wealth and poverty, with so many opportunities and perils;
- 5 in which our plans and choices can either frustrate or further God's plan for us.

I do not know whether governors will become more powerful and more efficient. I do not know whether they will readily share their power with parents, teachers and pupils. I do not know whether headmasters will join secretaries and caretakers and those who came not to be served but to serve. I do not know whether latin and

²³ Jn 14, 26.

²⁴ Acts 15, 28.

french will go the way of greek, or whether more boys will turn to home economics and more girls to heavy engineering. I do not know whether the children will even come to school, or whether we shall have to seek them out in the streets. I do not know whether we shall ever have the money. I do know that God has a plan for us as individuals and as members of communities. I know that his plan is to make us his sons and so to create a relationship with him and with others, which is lived to perfection by Jesus Christ. I know that the life of prayer developed in us by the holy Spirit is the path along which we discover this plan. I know that sons of God as men of their time must be prepared to use their own talents and energies, and those of experts, to marshal all the relevant information. I know that Jesus Christ can speak his word of love in the entangled influences which play upon our schools, just as he spoke it in the midst of conflicts between jew and roman. I know that the quest for God's plan in the complex raw material of our lives must be the work of individuals and groups; each person in contact with God and his world making his contribution to the group; the group in contact with God and their world enriching the individual's contact with God. I know that all this can be dismissed as theology, mysticism or hot air. If it is, we can return with relief to our accounts and building plans, and forget about the future of catholic schools. Or we can learn:

Before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his in Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love, God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would bring us to himself as his sons – this was his pleasure and purpose.²⁵

You have been raised to life with Christ. Set your hearts then on the things that are in heaven . . . not on things here on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Your real life is Christ, and when he appears then you too will appear with him and share his glory.²⁶

Yes, even the catholic schools will share his glory.

²⁵ Eph 1, 4-5.

²⁶ Col 3, 1-4.