

EDUCATION AS MINISTRY

By JOAN BLAND

IT SEEMS feasible to discuss education as ministry only in relation to reasonably clear definitions of ministry and of education. In both cases many definitions are possible; but here we shall consider ministry as participation, through service, of the consecrated person in Christ's mission, and education as any process which is designed to facilitate human growth.

Obviously, the concept of ministry relates to the educator rather than to education, so we shall undertake some exploration of the relationship, in the case of religious, between consecration and ministry. Afterward we shall consider, not the comparative merits of various educational processes as such, but the possibilities for ministry in some of those which are widely used at present or are widely recommended for the future.

Consecration and ministry

In Christ, life and mission are identical.¹ To the extent that those whom Christ has consecrated live out their consecration fully, their life and ministry will become identical also, because they are consecrated for mission.

But such a life presumes a very high level of personal integration, a more than notional awareness that the 'world is charged with the grandeur of God'.² In a thousand subtle ways an educator communicates his vision of God, of man, of the world. But the consistent presence of the christian vision presupposes a deeply contemplative spirit, a pervasive awareness that makes possible what St Julie Billiart called 'the rapture of action and operation'.³ In her analysis of this ideal of contemplation in action, Sister Mary Linscott writes:

It is a recognition that God meets man and works with him in creation, continually preparing the *pleroma*. The specific grace of the

¹ See Fr Molinari's article, 'Consecration for Mission', *supra* pp 4-5.

² See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Penguins Books, London, 1970).

³ See Mary Linscott, S.N.D., *The Fourth Essential* (Liverpool, 1971), p 40.

apostolic religious would seem to consist in a loving consciousness of the presence and operation of God in all things.⁴

This consciousness includes also the realization that the Lord lives in the heart of his servant (whom he prefers to call his friend), works through his hands, speaks in his words, making of his disciple the instrument of God's salvific will, in the strength of the covenant which was sealed by his consecration for mission.

Such consciousness is probably not absolutely constant in any human being; but the measure of its presence is a most important factor in the effectiveness of christian ministry. All authentically christian service is turned towards the communication of this vision, the source of all the meaning and value in human life; and in this sense at least all genuinely christian ministry is educational. Human happiness does not depend on efficient sanitation or facilities for rapid locomotion or even on a perfectly balanced diet. It depends on the perceived meanings and values in one's existence. It depends on relationships among persons, and ultimately on the relationship with the one Person whose love is not measured either by our performance or by our potentialities. Because the christian vision of life is communicated in many other ways, ministry is not limited to the ordained priesthood of sacrament and word. Christian ministry embraces every service which is rooted in christian love.

Christian love is fed by our adherence to him whom we do not see; but if we do not love those we do see we do not love at all. Communion with the Lord sends us out to feed his sheep. The tragedy and splendour in human lives bring us back for light and love and solace and for the strength to go on. Such is the rhythm of one's earlier years. But in time the pendulum stops swinging. There must still be the hours of total communion, absorbing every faculty; but the communion is constantly recaptured in the classroom or the library or the slum. If we do not aspire to such a life, our service may be professionally unexceptionable and may attain its immediate ends, but it will not constitute christian ministry. Having been asked by a starving world for bread, we will present it with a stone.

Our most fundamental work will always be to give, because we have received it, the vision without which the people perish, and of which there is today a more and more conscious need. Ultimately science and technology must enhance men's vision of the world and of life, but for the moment they often obscure it. Primitive men,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 49.

because their surroundings were mysterious to them in nearly all details, invariably postulated an unseen world. It was clear to them at least that they did not know the whole story. But we contemporary men tend to imagine that because we sometimes visit our nearest neighbour, the moon, we understand the whole universe and whatever may lie beyond it, thereby obviating a mysterious God. Even in terms of the physical world, this is an absurdly unscientific attitude, not to mention the assumption that we understand also the ultimate reasons and causes, or our own complex psyches, without help from beyond ourselves. What is involved here looks like a simple failure of imagination, but it is very widespread.

It is to this failure in imagination, essentially, that Teilhard de Chardin addressed himself. His message to the apostolic religious is, quite simply, that the Christ to whom we are consecrated is also the Christ in whom was made everything that was made; the cosmic Christ, the One who is nearer than hands and feet, the One who is with us always, sending us as his Father sent him.

He is also the Christ we meet in men and women and children, and in these terms his character has been defined as a divine regardfulness of the rights and possibilities of every human person.⁵ Perhaps what the consciousness of his presence in every human contact will teach us is precisely this 'regardfulness' for persons. Our apostolic assignments or choices merely determine, in the last analysis, whose rights and possibilities we shall regard. But because some of us are much better qualified, by charism, temperament, talent, training and experience, to share the vision of the risen Christ with some people, and others of us with others, these decisions remain important. What follows is a discussion of only a fraction of the opportunities of educational ministry for the non-clerical religious that abound in our time, and among which contemporary religious must decide.

The case for institutional service

In spite of such powerful voices as that of Ivan Illich⁶ and a highly vocal reaction against institutional commitments on the part of some religious, a considerable proportion of religious men and a large majority of religious women still carry out their educational

⁵ Vonier, Anscar: *Collected Works: Vol I, The Incarnation and Redemption* (London, 1952), p 208.

⁶ 'Why we must abolish schooling', in the *New York Review of Books*, July 2, 1970, pp 9-15.

service in catholic schools. For religious, this service varies existentially from a de-personalized and de-personalizing routine to a splendid ministry of creative communication. Its character as ministry depends on administration and environment, but above all it depends on the awareness and the dedication of individual teachers, on their effective consciousness of their covenant with the Lord.

If, compared with the newer forms of educational apostolate which we will discuss below, the catholic school presents to some people a greater temptation to serve unimaginatively, it usually does at least offer an assurance of real apostolic opportunity which cannot always be guaranteed by the newer apostolates. There *will* be a number of human beings, to whom we are sent, present before us day after day. In fact few people can work without models, patterns, blue-prints, conceived at least as points of departure. Even the most innovative classroom teacher builds on hundreds of years of corporate experience. Her creative contribution probably accounts for only a small portion of her procedures. But for the newer extra-institutional set-ups there often are no models, patterns, blue-prints, and sometimes a rather ineffective use of human energy results. Obviously, models for the future will emerge in those cases where creative persons encounter real needs; but meanwhile one question should be asked in every individual case. Will brother Y or sister X, in a new centre for, say, drug rehabilitation, which must be built from scratch, reach as many people as effectively as in an established classroom? The answer depends, of course, on brother Y or sister X, and on many other variables. The fact remains that whoever is responsible for assignments must be sure that the question has been sincerely asked. It can be argued, of course, that, although little may be accomplished in the first year of the drug centre's operation, a work will be begun which is ultimately very important. It is also true that drug addicts have far more pressing needs than ordinary school-children, and that these needs are not being met. On the other hand, there are religious who can function constructively in an institution, but are too dependent on structure to serve well outside such a framework, especially if they are not specifically prepared for the particular task. The total result of the co-ordinated work of several religious often seems to exceed the sum of their individual contributions; and in an era of more and more complex organization in every facet of society, it seems unrealistic, from an apostolic point of view, to abandon all institutional centres of influence.

The test for an institutional commitment, on the part of a religious congregation, may well be whether it provides a viable ministry for the religious involved; that is to say, an environment in which they can communicate the christian vision and life. If it does, it is providing a genuine service for its public.

Ministry in the innovative classroom

The person who has been serving for some years outside the school situation may enter the contemporary classroom with a start. According to his temperament and his preconceptions, he may be delighted or appalled. Gone, in many schools, are the serried ranks of disciplined youngsters, responding to quasi-military signals from the teacher's desk. Little groups of buzzing children or adolescents may be gathered, each sitting on one of the small pillows strewn around the floor, and perhaps studying together a map spread out before them. One pupil may wear ear-phones, receiving individual instruction from a well-prepared record. Another may be showing his composition to a thoroughly interested teacher. There are probably several para-professionals in the room, helping to guide the groups and individuals. In catholic schools in the United States, these assistants are often volunteer mothers from the parish, in some cases well qualified to teach themselves but here assisting the teacher on a part-time basis.

What about ministry in this situation? Most of the traditional obstacles have been removed. The exigencies of a rigid discipline need not come between teacher and student. The child or young adult may be loved and guided as an individual human being, with a mind and a character to develop, and, above all, a love-relationship with God and man to establish. Here it is really possible to imitate the 'divine regardfulness for the rights and possibilities of every human person'. Here there is space and time to be aware of the Lord who sends us, and of our students as his people.

Such a school will probably be wide open to the larger community, striving to use every educational resource. There may be a week of 'mini-courses', offered with the co-operation of the fire department, a faculty member who used to be a missionary in Africa, a retired naval officer who lived in Pearl Harbour, a judge from the juvenile court. The religious teacher learns with the students about the resources of the larger community, about the milieu he should help to christianize, and from which he may expect support and assistance in the formation of his charges.

The education of educators

Especially in Britain and in the developing countries, many religious are engaged in the preparation of teachers. Obviously this is seed-work, rich with possibilities. Here a successful ministry, in the deepest sense, may serve thousands of persons, some of them yet unborn. The object lesson of the person wholly given to persons for Christ's love may well have a 'multiplier' effect in such a group.

In developing areas, those who offer this service during the transition years while international assistance is still needed, may have a positive christian and liberalizing impact on the development of whole cultures, not so much by overt evangelization as by a steady imitation of the Lord, with his 'divine regardfulness'.

The extra-congregational institution

In recent years, a constantly increasing number of religious educators have accepted posts in institutions outside their congregational commitments – in public schools (in the U.S. sense of government-operated), in colleges and universities, in ecumenically sponsored private institutions, in campus ministry or chaplaincy situations. On the one hand, such positions may provide an excellent setting for what might be called the ministry of the leaven. On the other, because it is an individual apostolate and may, in practice, become a lonely one, the opportunities for effective ministry are sometimes missed. If the work consists of the teaching of a secular subject in a situation where overt evangelization is out of the question, an effective ministry is possible only for the religious who is both very deeply committed and very suitably endowed. In respect of many saints of past times, the testimony of what they were, outweighed every other apostolic contribution; but if such a testimony is to be given by us who are not yet saints, working separately from our brethren, we have to expect that its weight can only be in proportion to where we, personally, are. We will need to remain very conscious of who it is that sends us, and why.

Sometimes campus-ministry personnel are well integrated with the university faculty. Sometimes they are quite distinct from it, with little communication. There are advantages for ministry both ways. The more official status tends to provide pastoral contact with faculty as well as students; but the more unofficial set-up may permit a more properly evangelical independence of action and stance, particularly on controversial questions.

In a U.S. city, in a large technical, very inner-city public high school, according to the testimony of a young teacher who has no faith commitment, the most devoted and effective member of the faculty is a middle-aged sister. The sister is performing a task which too few able teachers elect to perform: the education of adolescents who are culturally disadvantaged, with the 'regardfulness' made possible by the realization that he who has consecrated her for mission is with her in performing it. She is not alone in her blackboard jungle.

Is administration ministry?

The type of work which many religious find most difficult to see as ministry is administration. They tend to conceive the apostolate in terms of direct contact with the persons which a particular school or project exists to serve, and to feel that administrators must spend too much time on 'paper-work'. In addition, administration today is usually complicated by the wide-spread reaction against all authority; and those who must accept the rôle are especially liable to discouragement.

It is clear, however, that administration is ministry in a vital sense. Our ministry is to any human being we have the opportunity to serve. Certainly this classification includes fellow-religious, lay-staff, parents, fellow-administrators in related programmes. Few positions, in fact, offer so much opportunity to imitate the 'divine regardfulness'.

Above all, the ministry possible for others in a particular institution can be facilitated or impeded by the administrator. His task requires the selfless type of dedication which is directed to procuring for others the maximum opportunity for christian service.

One of the more direct and obvious areas of lay ministry is guidance in its many contemporary forms. Within our traditional schools, it is assuming a more and more important place. In extra-congregational institutions, this work seems especially appropriate for religious. Child guidance clinics, remedial centres of various kinds, because they work with persons on a more individual basis, offer especially clear opportunities for 'regardfulness'.

Ministry beyond the institutions

Among the strongest movements in contemporary religious life is the pull away from all institutional apostolates, the urge to get simply to the people of God, without structures, entanglements, or

even organization beyond what is strictly necessary. Many religious are engaged part-time in these apostolates, and some full-time. A good example may be the effort to help build basic human communities in the inner-cities of the western world or in developing countries. At least in theory, a great effort is made not to dominate but simply to assist groups of persons to find themselves in relation to one another and to their environment, so that they can render mutual assistance and seek liberation from oppressive structures. The ministry involved is complex and difficult, and supposes a high degree of selflessness, good judgment and patience on the part of those who undertake it. To the extent that the liberation sought is the freedom of God's sons, it is true ministry.

Simple home-visiting, informal study groups, being available to people who need a sympathetic ear: all these provide opportunities for an educational ministry outside the classroom, as of course do countless other types of informal communication. Because these ministries are often on an individual basis, without the support of companions, they require an especially deep sense of loving dependence on the Lord and a strong consciousness of his presence and power.

In the United States at least, every year more parishes decide that they need a qualified director of religious education. Sometimes there is no catholic school in the parish, but in other cases the school continues to function, and a complementary programme is established by a person sometimes called the Director of Religious Education. The D.R.E.'s administrative responsibility often extends to the religious education of adults as well as children. He or she usually works with a corps of volunteer lay-teachers, planning, coordinating, supervising. There is an important but usually indirect ministry to the whole parish, and a closer association with volunteer colleagues. The apostolic opportunities are obvious and impressive, and the hazards in the situation are also notable. Relations with the pastor, in some cases, demand extraordinary tact and heroic patience. At the same time, the almost inevitable parish feuds and lesser contests swirl about, threatening the unwary with the perils of a whirlpool. In general, the chances of a glorious ministry are awesome and so are the qualifications required. Nevertheless, the tribe increases and will probably continue to do so. Some religious with this type of experience believe that a better solution would be a group of religious, or of religious and lay-people, with various types of expertise (theology, scripture, counselling, group dynamics,

early childhood education etc.), working together as a team. In any case, the challenge of religious education, at the level required by the conditions of contemporary life, must surely be taken with great seriousness by every educating congregation. There is a serious shortage of religious willing to teach religion today. Many feel incompetent, sometimes even when their qualifications appear fully adequate. The difficulties are real; but in this more direct ministry, even more than in others, it is important to avoid pelagian misconceptions about how much depends on our own efforts as distinct from what the Lord will do through us.

When the forms of non-sacramental ministry in the Church are analysed, a larger proportion of the total effort involved appears to have an educational character. One visits the sick at least partly in the effort to help them understand the spiritual possibilities in their condition. One consoles the bereaved with the assurances of faith. One counsels the doubtful with the communication of the truth one knows or can help the person to find within himself. Even professional social work includes the education of clients in the practical affairs of life. If it is true that education is ministry, it is also true that ministry is, in most cases, education.

There are already teachers who work day after day without ever seeing their students. In time there will be many more of them. They give the television lessons; they make the classroom films; they plan the instructional tapes etc. Their human consolations may tend to be fewer than those of the classroom teacher, but their influence is great and constantly growing. Certain developing areas seem destined to skip the classroom phase of education altogether and go directly from general illiteracy to education by television. It does not take much imagination to realize that the Church ought to be effectively present in this development. If we want to keep a tryst with tomorrow, to help carry Christ's mission into the future, this looks like a very high priority.

The 'divine regardfulness' which we aspire to imitate applies not only to those we teach but also to those we do not. The impact of the educator is not only on the one he strives to educate, but also on every human being whose life his student will touch. Education is ministry in a clear and obvious sense. It is a superb opportunity to communicate the christian vision, to help build the most important of all bridges, the one between God and man. It is second only to the direct ministry of the sacraments, because in a deep and true sense it is the ministry of the word.