

SCHOOL CHAPLAIN

By PAUL EDWARDS

A SUNDAY columnist once maliciously described a rival columnist as making a living by serving the public with his life story 'sliced up thin'. I should like to begin the light repast with a lean cut from my own (unwritten) autobiography. It will not be a thick slice, because the purpose of the offering is both to claim a basis of experience for my theorizing, and simultaneously to admit the narrowness of that basis.

In 1969, I was in my fifteenth year as a teacher at the only school in which I had ever taught, St Michael's College, Leeds. In that year the first steps were taken to transfer the direction of the school into lay hands, and one of the steps was to whisk me from my long occupied niche and deposit me for a sabbatical year in the Theology Department of Bristol University. There my researches into the life and times of Cardinal Manning concerned me rather less than the question of what I was to do with myself in the subsequent year. The answer from my superiors was that I should remain in the Bristol chaplaincy as an assistant, and as that was not considered a full-time occupation, I should find myself additional employment.

Perfectly biddable as always, I took what I judged to be the obvious first step and wrote an advertisement for myself, a form of literary composition which I found interesting, and sent a copy to each of the six catholic secondary schools in Bristol. Two of those schools were direct grant grammar schools, one run by nuns, the other by brothers. A third, belonging to another congregation of nuns, was wholly independent. The remaining three were lay-run 'comprehensives', as comprehensive as may be in the presence of three grammar schools. When I posted my self-advertisement I quite took it for granted that the nuns would find me an attractive piece of goods. What other nuns' school had on the staff a jesuit with an Oxford degree, who had been a deputy-headmaster, who was an assistant university chaplain and whose articles they were used to reading in *The Way*? The brothers I expected to find less enthusiastic, but still interested in employing a priest and a fellow religious. I had no idea at all what to expect from the three lay headmasters.

What happened? From the three grammar schools run by religious congregations I had a single reply, a courteous note from a nun

headmistress to say that there was no vacancy on her staff. Of the three lay headmasters, two rang me up the morning they received my letter. The third waited until he met me. All three offered me work. That these lay-men should all be so very welcoming struck me very forcibly. Unless Bristol is quite unrepresentative, it would seem that lay teachers are positively eager to have priests working with them in their schools. A further thought was much in mind at that time. These three men were responsible for well over two thousand children. In Leeds we had six hundred boys and among their teachers were no less than nine priests. I was glad that I was doing something to redress the distribution.

At this period I had been reading, brooding and at one point even lecturing on the theology of the priesthood. I had pored over the documents of Vatican II, which taught me that I was an 'aid and instrument' of the bishop and that I 'made him present in a sense in the individual, local congregation of the faithful'. Anxious that my own priestly mission to the children of St Bernadette's Secondary School be formally ratified by the local representative of the Episcopal College, I intended to write to the bishop and inform him of my appointment. Before I had carried out my intention, I happened to meet a priest about whose precise role in control of diocesan education I had better be vague. He already knew that I was going to St Bernadette's. I told him I was writing to the bishop. 'No, don't', said his reverence, 'he doesn't want to know about things like that'.

I was, and am, dismayed. A priest was about to spend half his time in a school where more than seven hundred catholic children were being educated, and it would be wasting the bishop's time and attention even to state the bare fact to him. Perhaps I should have persevered with my intention. The bishop might well have had a higher estimation of the value of a priest's work and the value of a catholic school and the possibility of these two values coinciding, than did his educational adviser. I did not write and the bishop was unaware that I was teaching when, more than a year later, I was delated to him. Saying mass for the sixth form, I allowed myself a few rubrical liberties. Hearing of this the most senior local cleric promptly phoned the bishop. Here was a matter worth bringing to his Lordship's notice. Once again, the bishop may have seen things differently, as he did not see fit to rebuke me.

With or without my episcopal mission, I went to St Bernadette's, a co-educational, comprehensive school, with, as I explained above, less than its representative share of the more academically able. I have taught in a grammar school, preached, given retreats, lectured and even written articles. Never have I wished to succeed as I wished to succeed at

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St Bernadette's. At least, I think so, but that may be because I have never been less successful. My failure was not total. I was listened to when I preached; masses 'went well'; I was quickly and happily at home in the staff-room and my apprentice speakers won three public speaking awards. I think that the sixth learned something from me, but in most other classes I was largely incompetent. I had no idea what to do with wilful little girls. I had no idea how to get the interest of the less able, how to organize their work or how to keep them at it. My self-esteem went through the mincing machine each day. Nevertheless, when I left after two years, the headmaster's final words to me were: 'When I said that we were going to have a priest on the staff a number of the staff were dubious. Now they all think it's a good thing'. The conclusion here is, not that I may have taught better than I thought, but that the staff had found the presence of a priest, even a pedagogically feeble one, a real asset.

I left after two years because I was offered the chance to return to St Michael's, Leeds, as a teacher-chaplain. This offer I accepted gladly. At Bristol I was doing two jobs, teaching at school and helping in the chaplaincy. Originally I had hoped for some highly enriching cross-fertilization. Instead, with only half my mind on each, both plants remained wan and stunted. I was now eager to give myself to a single task, or, as that is always too much to hope for, to have a single principal occupation. By this time St Michael's had a lay headmaster and only two jesuits teaching there, one of whom was leaving for Canada. The school was scheduled to become non-selective in twelve months. (That schedule has not been realized.) I was now one of the few english jesuits who had taught under a lay headmaster and worked in a non-selective school. If I had not solved the problems of the second part of the situation, I had first-hand knowledge of what they were.

I was also more than content that my principal work should lie in secondary education. My three years in a university chaplaincy had only enhanced my appreciation of the role of the secondary school. I had observed a chaplain whose gifts were remarkable and whose dedication was total, and seen how his work was restricted by what had happened during the students' schooling. A good chaplain may help the 'practising' to deepen their commitment; he may hold the waverers. But those who have ceased to 'practise' at school, or who have conformed just to avoid fuss at home or school, the chaplain may never even see. For two years I had been watching the children at St Bernadette's and come to the conclusion that the parish clergy could not be expected to do very much for them. Their understanding of christianity is not going to

be greatly deepened by the short, though often tedious, Sunday sermon which is addressed to the whole parish. A liturgy likewise aimed at the general parishioner says little to the average teenager, even if there is an occasional 'folk' mass. Except to a few altar servers, and to some adolescents who belonged to a good youth club, the clergy were, it seemed to me, distant figures to most of our pupils. They appeared on the altar in vestments. ('Going into Church is like stepping into history', said one of my pupils. She was not expressing her appreciation of tradition. She meant that it all belonged in a museum.) They perform from the pulpit. They are seen, perhaps unfairly, as censorious and authoritarian.

I do not need anyone to point out to me that teachers are also seen as authoritarian and censorious and as belonging to another world largely irrelevant to the young. Nevertheless, in school, the exposition of Catholicism is to small groups of the same age, not to the whole parish at once. It is allotted perhaps three periods a week, not a ten-minute sermon, and it can be done with pictures, books and all the other pedagogical aids. Mass can be offered with groups of varying size and at least partly adapted (not very much, or someone may telephone the bishop), to the age, vocabulary and outlook of the pupils. I presume that the principal influence in our lives is that of our family. I do not know how to assess the importance of primary education. But I have no doubt that our people's knowledge of the faith, their appreciation of the Church, its outlook and its worship, depends in great measure upon their secondary schooling. The priest, trained, sacramentally ordained, apostolically commissioned to evangelize, to build up the community of the faithful by word and worship, is surely called to work this harvest field, to labour in it with his sleeves rolled up and his mud heavy on his boots, not just stand inside the gate occasionally, with a smile of vapid unfocused benevolence poised somewhere above his clerical collar. Three years ago, in another northern diocese, I met a middle-aged priest who complained to me that several priests were working full time in the catechetical centre, 'when men are needed on the mission'. The mission naturally meant the parishes. The routines of the parish count as missionary endeavour. The efforts of the catechetical centre to help teachers to instruct children, to lead them in worship, were not in his myopic vision 'missionary'.

Convinced that I was 'on the mission' quite as much as any suburban parish priest, I returned to St Michael's as a full-time teacher-chaplain. The very notion of a teacher-chaplain, I know, runs counter to a common and not unreasonable view of the school chaplain, which maintains that

he should never take classes. He should not teach because the role of a priest and the role of a teacher differ. On the more practical plane, teachers must in their exercise of control appear at times as hostile, authoritarian figures, whose discipline is resented. If the priest is to be a welcome, pastoral person in whom the pupils are willing to confide, he must avoid all disciplinary situations. I see the sense of this. My discipline is not nearly as effective as it once was, because I feel that as a chaplain I must make all my mistakes on the side of leniency, not harshness, and the boys are soon implicitly aware of this. Recently I found a boy prone and silent at the foot of some stairs. He had been kicked down them by a gang from another class. While comforting the boy I was quickly on the trail of his assailants before the scent should go cold. I handed the investigation over to the school captain as soon as I could, but I had already discovered the ringleader. That young brute and his followers will now see me as a policeman rather than as a pastor.

Yet for me the overwhelming consideration is that the teaching staff are expected to 'evangelize' — a word I want to use as shorthand for the sum of their efforts in the religious field — and simultaneously to exercise control and discipline. Am I to dodge what is perhaps their greatest difficulty? While they are always exposed to the horns of this nasty dilemma, shall I camp out under the safety of the biretta? I should wither with shame. At St Michael's, the chaplains are spared playground duty on the grounds that we have other work at this time. I am decidedly glad of this slight privilege, but I still feel a bit of a coward.

There is much force in the theoretical argument that a chaplain's relationship to the body of the school differs from that of a teacher. The staff educate the children at one level; at another the chaplain ministers to them liturgically, sacramentally and by direct pastoral care of all kinds. This quite coherent analysis seems to me to demand too much of a priest. Is he expected to deal confidently and amiably with the intelligentsia of the sixth, to manage the ugliest customers of the middle school with competence and humour, to deal with the youngest without boredom or clumsiness? No common man should be expected to deal as a matter of routine with the whole spectrum of age, ability and temperament which a school contains. A headmaster who attempted it would be something of a megalomaniac. He has a senior mistress for the girls; he appoints a teacher to have general charge of the first-year children, and so on. You do expect that the staff working together can deal with the whole range of the school. Is the chaplain to attempt in the spiritual dimension what no sane headmaster would attempt in the secular?

Here you have another weakness of the chaplain-not-a-teacher theory. In a catholic school the staff have a spiritual responsibility for their pupils, so what is all this about a different dimension? But I am allowing myself to be distracted. Because only the staff as a whole can be expected to be adequate to the pupil body as a whole, it seems to me that the obvious way to approach all the pupils is not by my solitary, sacerdotal self, but through and with (the phrase is suitably liturgical) the whole teaching body. And I urge that this is best done by being one of them, by having a time-table, by marking books, trying to get one's reports done in time, losing one's register (quite temporarily) and trying to accept gracefully the highly inconvenient loss of a free period. To use a good West Riding metaphor, I am glad to be working at the coal face of education with my lay colleagues, to be getting the coal dust in my eyes and mouth and to be running the same risk of spiritual silicosis.

A good teaching staff is produced by the effective blending of a variety of contributions. You need the usual range of subjects, academic and practical, and as large an assortment of interests and hobbies as can be found. You want the experience of the older and the energy of the younger, the exigency of the idealistic and the judgment of the practical, the stimulus of the imaginative and the ballast of the phlegmatic. The chaplain should blend into this rich mixture his presbyteral character, his sacerdotal powers, his professional knowledge and his individual qualities. 'Presbyteral character' certainly needs explaining. I am not speaking of any mark or seal upon my soul, but of my formal, official commitment to the Church's mission in the degree of presbyter. I view my presence in a school as an acknowledgment by the Church that the school is a place where the gospel is preached and the Church developed, and that this is what the whole school is engaged upon. It very much spoiled my case when I was told that the bishop didn't want to know. Still, I had the encouragement of my superiors, the invitation of the lay headmaster and my own deliberate presbyteral choice, and surely that sufficed to represent the Church!

The chaplain, I suggest, should bring to a staff ecclesial, not necessarily ecclesiastical, recognition, the availability of his sacramental powers and theological knowledge; and he should do his damndest to be a source of inspiration, appreciation and support. I said above that a chaplain should not set himself the task of dealing with every age group. Now I am demanding something almost as taxing, that he cope with the whole range of temperament in a staff-room. If teachers differed in nothing but their religious convictions, there would still be plenty for the chaplain to do. He must deal tactfully and helpfully with the conservative aghast

at 'the changes in the Church' and with the impatient radical, while being dishonest with neither. He must make himself acceptable to the lukewarm and even the lapsed catholic. The staff-room may also contain devout non-catholics, the vaguely christian and people of no religious belief at all. I think that the priest is less the official representative of the Church in the eyes of the devout catholic than he is in the view of the lapsed catholic and the non-catholic. It is a most important facet of my work to make the Church wear through me a friendly tolerant, appreciative face towards them. I must disarm their feelings that they may be suspect.

More positively, I should manifest the Church's respect for what they are accomplishing in the school in their routine teaching, and especially in their pastoral care for the children. A lapsed catholic may be a good colleague, and I should help to make him feel so. The devout non-catholic may be quite eager to help on religious occasions. The non-christian's dedication to his pupils must be appreciated, be seen to be appreciated and this without the faintest hint of patronage.

Allow me to tell another story. The young biology mistress was not a catholic. One day she was talking to her class about human evolution when, to her consternation and mine when I heard of it, they stopped her. 'You mustn't talk to us about evolution, miss, catholics don't believe in evolution'. Aghast at this obscurantism and fearful of stirring up sectarian controversy she backed away from the cliff edge. Before she dropped the subject she allowed herself a single remark in her defence. 'I bet Fr Edwards believes in evolution!'

The chaplain's interest in his fellow-teachers and their individual contributions to the school should be lively, catholic and unmistakably genuine. The indiscriminate, uncomprehending benignity of royalty inspecting a nuclear power station will not do. I must be genuinely interested in the art exhibition. I must sincerely enjoy the dramatic performance, or at least be really glad of the benefits it will bring the performers. There is no need to multiply examples.

My colleague at Leeds, my fellow chaplain, Tony Horan, teaches A and O level Scripture and takes a variety of religious education classes. I teach A level History, Current Affairs, Use of English, and Religious Education classes in the sixth. I teach O level Scripture and take a junior religious education class. These are two very different programmes and I prefer mine. I am glad to have a hand in the profane education of our pupils and not to be dealing entirely with religious matters. Or, to put it differently, I prefer not to recognize a distinction between profane and religious knowledge and to treat all wisdom and knowledge as one.

I like dealing with more than one facet of the total development of our children. I am very pleased that the class which hears me expounding the gospel at mass also listens to me explaining current affairs. I am not claiming that Tony is wrong. I have an uneasy feeling that efficient teaching usually needs to be specialist teaching, and that dealing with a variety of subjects leads to hand-to-mouth preparation and amateurish presentation. Yet I should regret being confined within the religious band of the academic spectrum. Religion which is not plainly integrated with life as a whole is deformed religion. It would be wrong for the pupils to study religion in isolation, and I think that it would be deleterious for me to try and teach it on its own.

The remaining points I wish to make form a series of appendages. Greater literary facility and longer concentration might have found a way of connecting them more logically with the foregoing, but neither asset was to hand. The first thing I want to say is that the chief effect on me of being the only priest in a school, or one of a pair, has been to make me far more conscious of being a priest. I have had to reflect much harder and much longer on the role of the priest in secondary education. I have scrutinized my conduct more searchingly, and I hope, more sensitively. Whether this has had any effect beyond, as I explained above, weakening my discipline, I do not know. If it has not, I have wasted a lot of mental energy. I prefer not to wear clerical dress in school, but often do so, and always for parents' affairs. I like to be called 'Paul' in the staff-room, but would never ask the traditionalists to stop calling me 'Father'. I try to waive or evade all privilege of status, but do not quite succeed. I would wish to do without all adventitious clerical gear, style and nomenclature, so that the only signs of my priesthood would be the actual performance of my sacerdotal functions, and the genuine evidence of a presbyteral role obviously fulfilled.

My second appendage comes from this morning's discussion. The chaplain, in my view, should be a redoubtable protagonist of the personal. A boy's school will tend to be impersonal and a boy's grammar school can become a mere learning-shed. I take it to be one of my principal duties to fight against this, to put myself behind every attempt to treat the boys as individuals, as whole persons, and not mere units of educable material. I always use christian names, and am quite pleased that I forget surnames more rapidly than christian names. On the corridors and on the stairs I try to greet every boy whom I teach or have taught. Give me another year or so and I shall probably nod my head off. It already looks a little odd; but I do not mind appearing a bit bizarre if it helps to maintain the principle that I am educating human

beings, and that teaching is a relationship between people. Don Revie says that at Elland Road he used to talk to the people who cleaned the stands and to the women who washed the players' kit. A school contains secretaries, laboratory assistants, maintenance men, canteen workers and cleaners. The chaplain may not have time to talk to many of them, but he should never not say 'Hullo'.

Thirdly: I grow increasingly ashamed of the aloofness which has commonly characterized our relationship with the diocesan clergy. When there were nine of us working at Leeds, I could not have told you with any confidence what priests were on the staff of the Cathedral, which was ten minutes walk away, and in whose parish we were. Some of us helped in the parishes occasionally, but usually saw this as something quite distinct from our work in school. At the end of last term, Tony and I held a penance service for the upper half of the school. We invited three diocesan priests to help us hear the confessions. Between us we heard confessions for over seven hours. I think that it is usually a serious weakness of the jesuit chaplain, whether in university or school, that he does not know the local clergy well, and will not do so unless he is willing to take far more trouble in that direction than his english jesuit tradition has accustomed him to do. And because he does not know them, he has little idea how to get help from them, or to work with them so that his charges are not tended by two quite dissociated institutions. If the Church is to be one, the diocese must first have unity. The diocese cannot have unity where the presbyterium is divided. It is time that the english jesuits abandoned wholeheartedly their self-contained tradition, and sincerely attached themselves to the dioceses in which they work.

Finally, I want to raise a personal problem. In the last two years I have put together 30,000 words on the theology of the priesthood; I have written three articles, I have given retreats and days of recollection. I have preached three times a term in the University Chaplaincy and taken part in discussion groups there. I have preached in parish churches. I am now trying to put together a theology of possessions. I don't think that that is the whole story. I have fingers in so many pies that I have sometimes to use my toes. The separate headings I can justify. A teacher is a better teacher for being active at times outside the school walls. It is a good thing that a teacher should be a student. I raise my own intellectual level by my researches and my university contacts, and this surely benefits my pupils. They will also benefit from my regular essays in written and spoken communication. And so on. But should I be spending that much time and that much mental energy on matters not

directly concerned with my work in school? Perhaps I should be spending more time on preparation, on thinking about the school liturgy, in cultivating the staff, in visiting the pupils' homes. This problem is not new to you. I imagine that every teaching jesuit has had it. But it becomes much more severe for a single or a pair of chaplains, because one's priestly responsibility in the school is, of course, in inverse proportion to the number of priests teaching there.

This paper, as I re-read it, sound at times dogmatic and in places bumptious. The bumptiousness you must excuse. I am contritely aware of the gap between my principles and my practice, but see no point in drawing you a detailed chart of it. The dogmatism is a matter of manner rather than of mentality. On one point I am impenitently didactic. There are few places as apt for the deployment of our presbyteral mission as the staff-room of the catholic secondary school.