

# METANOIA AND MISSION

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**A**LTHOUGH the title of this conference is *Apostolic mission today*, it is not so much proposed in this paper to reflect upon any one aspect of contemporary apostolic mission and the hopes, difficulties, inspiration and dedication going with it, as upon the person of the contemporary apostle, be he priest, religious, or lay, as he goes about the Lord's work and, if we may so put it, the Lord's work goes about him. It is an attempt to explore one or two ways in which interior and intra-personal, as well as exterior and inter-personal aspects of human gift, receiving and giving itself in the Lord's service, are ready to be taken up into, to be transformed into and to express, not themselves, but his glory. Its central theme is change of christian heart and its discernment, both in what accompanies it continually for the individual christian and minister in the course of the service of others, and in his instrumentality in promoting it for others, as he and they are to be transformed.

## *Dimensions of christian life and ministry*

Christian life and ministry to others are inseparable. Every sharing of the grace of Christ risen has entailments for each recipient, and through each for all. Christian life is life given; it is life given to be given for others: 'Peace be to you: now go . . .' It is also life received from others. Each christian comes to faith, hope and charity through Christ and through his Church. The first words addressed to the candidate for baptism are: 'what do you ask of the Church?' — the response, 'faith'. So also the grace of christian ministry to others, given to every christian in baptism initially, and completed in ordination to priestly ministry, is a gift given through the Church. The beginnings of christian life and ministry are mediated through the Church, the body of Christ. Tertullian's words (though uttered in another context) are applicable: *caro salutis est cardo*<sup>1</sup> — that body is the hinge of salvation, for each and for all.

As for the beginnings of christian life and service, so growth in faith and in service of others in Christ's name continues to be mediated by the whole body of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> *De Resurrectione carnis*, 6.

From the earliest times of christian history, the same unanimity and union of hearts that characterized eucharistic gatherings also characterized corporate reflection, discernment and decision regarding apostolic action. 'It seems good to the holy Spirit and to us', said the apostles in Jerusalem, unanimous in future pastoral action.

It is perhaps uncharacteristic of our own christian day, as faithful reflection and its expression passes beyond the end of some ravages of post-reformation individualism, that some rediscovery of the fuller significance of the corporate dimensions, not to say experience, of christian life and growth has come to be expressed. This expression and its assimilation is, however, not easy. The human person is born of parent humanity a separately animated and embodied individual; as a general rule, the range and depth of potentially disordered experiences connected with that separateness, its personal appropriation, and its rational surrender, are not to be worked through in a day, a week or even, maybe, a month, though the workings of God's grace are beyond classification. *L'enfer, c'est les autres* is a poetic expression of the feelings that are to be redirected in christians into their Lord: feelings made up of the deepest human longings and love, sometimes prematurely expressed in strivings for ecstasy and immortality; and sometimes more immediately preceded by equally deep and aggressive defences of personal, bodily, territorial or institutional separateness. What the Spirit of God works in us, that we be one body in Christ, goes beyond these depths of our humanity. Some of the same feelings are called into play in christian ministry for the building up, through ministry's instrumentality, of Christ's body; to single out anyone from among men, and call on him thus singled out to be, and to do, more for others than others do, already might arouse the same depths: ranging from elation of anticipated glory to be wrought in and through the minister, to sometimes prematurely aggressively expressed fear of personal or institutional failure, in service, in preaching, in representing Christ in priestly ministry and action.

#### *Metanoia in christian life and ministry*

The beginning of christian life is a conversion; it is a turning away from what opposes God; it is a turning to him, a dying with Christ to rise with him to new life. Christian growth is, in the Spirit, a continuing realization of both, and a completion of them. Metanoia, this change of christian heart, is characteristic of the beginning of, and the whole course of, christian life; a continual assimilation of the divine life given us in Christ. It is also the first objective of christian preaching, as it

marked the beginning of the preaching of Christ himself: 'Repent, and believe in the gospel'.<sup>2</sup> This is a call, not to mere repentance and mere change, but to relinquishing what opposes God, and to embracing the way of life offered through him.

As metanoia is a continual accompaniment of christian life, so it is of service and ministry too: a critical and self-critical appraisal of what is done in the Lord. And its growth, like its beginning, is mediated through others, as well as individually undertaken by those who minister in Christ. But it is self-critical in a christian sense: that is, not divorced from the life and work of Christ yet more fully to be shared.

In every age of salvation history, metanoia has been mediated also by prophets, chosen by God to proclaim his love, life and presence with men; and often, more immediately, their estrangement from him. This was the calling of prophets before Christ, which he summed up and perfected in word and deed. This is also the task of those called as apostles to go out and preach in Christ's name. Prophets have their calling; their vision, maybe; their task to undertake, often an uncomfortable one for themselves as well as for their hearers; and they have their human side too. Their task often has a pungent *elenchus*.<sup>3</sup> Prophecy, involving as it has done, and can, unmasking, attacking, criticizing, confronting, admonishing, is not famous for its gentleness. But if it is to be truly christian, it can never divorce metanoia from reconciliation with God and men.

Both metanoia and prophecy can go astray through human frailty. The former in unproductive, even scrupulous and obsessional self-accusation; the latter in possibly emotionally over-determined attitudes of 'confrontation with everything'. Both these caricatures, which are recognizable even humanly and psychologically by their undifferentiated quality, are likely to be both insipid in faithful ears and harmful in the body of the Lord.

Prophecy and metanoia can be exercised among the faithful gathered together. Both can be mediated by community as well as by individuals. Unbelievers going into a community of believers are known.<sup>4</sup> Any play of human frailty, analogous to those mentioned above, also calls for similar discernment. At all times, a dispassionate search for truth; at times also the recognition that the attendant emotions and conditions they impose, through polarization etc., among those present, are not

<sup>2</sup> Mk 1, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Uleyn, A.: *The Recognition of Guilt* (Dublin, 1969), chs 1 and 4.

<sup>4</sup> Cf 1 Cor 14, 23-25.

leading into union in charity, will be among the criteria of such discernment. Prophecy and metanoia liberate and do not constrain, since they are of God.

When those who minister gather together to share and reflect on ministry, hoping for learning, growth and resolution in action, all the fore-going elements may also be at play. Pastoral reflection can indeed promote metanoia, but not in caricature; it may be prophetically mediated, but not in caricature. The fruits of such reflection among those who undertake it should be unitive of each to all and all to each.

*Analogues in therapeutic and group experience*

What helps towards individual healing and inter-personal growth has been the subject of modern reflection and research in psychological as well as other settings.

In the realm of inter-personal helping (laying aside reference here to psychoanalytical therapy and its derivatives) a distinction, sometimes over-clearly drawn maybe but none the less useful, has come to be made between guidance and counselling: the former more information-bearing, the latter more or less inclined to follow, depending on therapeutic viewpoint and circumstances, a more or less non-directive model (for example, that of Rogers).<sup>5</sup> There is, in such a model of non-directive help, an underlying assumption, not to say discovery, that there might be, to say the least, unhelpful ways of approaching the subject-matter of individual and personal suffering and disturbance. Evidence is not lacking that, in the broadest terms and depending on the characteristics of both the person mediating such help and, to some extent, those of the sufferer, methods based on such an assumption, can be successfully employed.<sup>6</sup>

One of the issues that has come to be sharply focused in the development of counselling methods is whether or not to, and if so, how to, confront those who ask help with what the therapist may become aware of concerning their needs and progress. It has come to be suggested that while head-on aggressive and personally directed criticism has no defensible place in counselling methods, yet a degree of confrontation, unmasking of games, evasions, defences etc., can be, and even should be, therapeutically serviceable.<sup>7</sup> All the same, this can only be

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, Carl: *Client-centered therapy* (London, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Truax, C., and Carkhuff, R.: *Towards effective counselling and therapy* (Chicago, 1969), chs 2 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> Egan, G.: *The Skilled Helper* (Monterey, 1975), ch 5.

undertaken within an already formed relationship with the therapist, and in such a manner as not to jeopardize this. The counsellor has to have established, as far as he can, the assurance of his presence with the person being helped, before any such exploration, undertaken within the range of what the recipient's own questioning is able to work on, is approached.

When groups gather together with a more or less task-orientated purpose, there are, again, various ways in which confrontation can develop between those present. One is connected with the task in hand. The compendious description of the forming-storming-norming-performing sequence is a well-known approximation to the observable stages of work-group development.<sup>8</sup> Another example, where less task-orientated and more self-study orientated groups are concerned, is where confrontation occurs as part of the self-discovery of participants.<sup>9</sup> An aspect, again, of the experience of group work in T-groups concerns the possibly damaging effects that some participants can experience through confrontation in the course of them; this has been a theme of recent research and comment.<sup>10</sup> The theme underlying these several examples, and the purpose with which they have been brought together, is that there are potentially surgical, even aggressive-looking, aspects of the quest for personal health in psychotherapy, whether it is sought by an individual or a therapist, or in group settings. From the extreme of appearing to lay aside the possibility of such aspects — as in non-directive therapy, therapeutic experience and formulations range to the acknowledgment that confrontation does occur; and it can, in certain circumstances, be made use of, mindful of its possibly damaging consequences, to assist therapy. But where such a claim is made, there is an accompanying awareness that confrontation can never be divorced from therapeutic purpose, nor undertaken as it were for its own sake; the recipients' need, readiness and, finally, liberty have to be kept clearly in view. Somewhat remotely, this resembles a truth which is intimately christian, that metanoia is for godly growth and is not just negative; that repentance can never be separated from belief in the gospel; admonition never divorced from charity; or confrontation from personal and free growth; prophecy from reconciliation.

Christian thankfulness can also begin where unmitigated aggression leaves off.

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<sup>8</sup> Argyle, M.: *Social interaction* (London, 1969), ch 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rogers, Carl: *Encounter groups* (London, 1970), ch 2.

<sup>10</sup> Argyle, *op. cit.*, ch 10.

*Christian group and community life*

The questions here raised concern those which at times face christian groups at prayer, at pastoral reflection etc., 'How is the action of the Spirit to be discerned?' Is there a quality, even a recognizable one, of readiness for christian sharing, decision, action? Are there, as in an individual's approach to readiness for choice of way of life (election), qualities which dispose more to union with Christ and the Lord's presence, distinguishable from those which dispose less? Certainly, in ordinary faithful experience, stemming from the Lord's example, this is so. There is no offering of gifts possible by neighbours at variance on the way. Unity is a condition of oblation, and all that follows from this and is entailed by it; unity too, with the whole body of Christ and not just with some part of it as part. So the faithful know the difference between debate, discussion, and, unlike both, prayer groups. Peace precedes communion. There can be nothing bumptious about people gathered together who have been reprieved from the same everlasting death through the innocent Lamb of God.

Such is the action of the holy Spirit for those who gather together in Christ: his people and his ministers. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of his Father, given us as from one principle; uniting what is divided. The Spirit comes to us from him who is the source of all power in heaven and on earth, and from him to whom all power is given. In this same Spirit we are to be united, to find holy and apostolic wisdom, and minister in his name.