

EXPANDING HORIZONS

By MICHAEL M. WINTER

WHAT IS IT that determines whether a priest is a missionary or a maintenance man? Could it be a simple question of motivation? I think not. All of us have the desire to spread the gospel; whether we share it or keep it to ourselves depends for the most part on the nature of the institution. The structures in which we live and work normally determine the outcome of our good intentions. This was shown clearly in the play called *Good* which ran in London last summer. It showed how an average german citizen joined the S.S. and became a monster. He was not a sadist by inclination; he just followed the grooves of the organization, and that is what we all do.

This is certainly true of the parish. Its essential delineaments were fixed in the twelfth century by the Third Lateran Council, which gave the local bishop the right to appoint the priest for a locality (dare I say, community?) which no longer contained heathens. The Church was the setting for routine services and *rites de passage*. Of these priests and their successors G. Bardy has said 'The diocesan clergy has never been missionary, and was not meant to be so'.¹ Similar to this is the fact that all significant moral reforms of the Church have been accomplished by the religious orders. The Counter-Reformation showed this as clearly as the epoch of the friars in the thirteenth century. To this day, the regions of France which are 'practising' owe it not to their being rural, but to the fact that their ancestors were the recipients of the missions which were preached there by the Lazarists in the seventeenth century. The invigorating of their faith did not depend upon the ministrations of the parochial clergy.

I do not say this in criticism of the diocesan priests. We are victims of the disfunction of the structures, and our work is held back by the role expectations of the laity. The demands which they make on the time of the parochial clergy are often for tasks which do not need ordination in the provider and which amount to no more than a holding operation in their spiritual lives.

Most priests, secular or regular, work in parishes or schools. What is the likelihood of their becoming missionaries? In view of what I have said above, I am convinced that a man will be a missionary in spite of, and not because of the structures. However, there is some

¹ *Prêtres de hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1954), p 53.

hope for the future. The horizons are expanding and later in the article I will indicate grounds for some optimism.

The time has now come to ask ourselves just what we mean by mission? Is it simply the gathering of more baptized members into the ranks of the R.C. communion? Do we regard it like collecting scalps? Is the flow really drying up since Vatican II? Or have we just ceased to take in the windfalls from next door? It would be interesting to know about the thousands who entered our ranks in the balmy days of the fifties: just how many came from non-belief, or were just shifting Church allegiance from another christian body? (Only the former really deserves the name of mission).

What is the characteristic operation? Do we think of St Paul at the Areopagus, and does this translate to the Catholic Evidence Guild platform in our society, or the TV screen? I am not dodging the issue if I parry that one by saying that the apostles were in a unique position. I am convinced that street corner evangelism has little chance of success in a society like ours which is no longer religious (in the cultural sense) but which has been impregnated by centuries of christianity, now only superficially understood.

It would take a long time to prove it, but it is universally accepted nowadays that the missionaries are the laity, and it all hinges upon grouping them into a missionary community. It is easy to say that the priest's role is to be the animator of such a community, but to make that statement meaningful we must be more clear about what we mean by mission and the Church's missionary task. Half a century ago Archbishop Temple declared that the Church existed primarily for those who were outside its ranks. The insight is valuable, but it did not say precisely what the Church might be doing for those who were outside, or inside for that matter. To clarify the question still further I prefer to examine the relationship between the concepts of Church and kingdom.

The widening of our concept of mission is the real growth point of our expanding horizons. Without further circumlocution I will state simply that the Church's mission is to act as the instrument for setting up the kingdom of God. In this perspective the rather pedestrian, visible community of the institutional Church effects the realization of something less precisely defined, namely the kingdom. Although it is an oversimplification, the kingdom can be described as the situation which obtains when the will of God prevails among men and in their dealings with one another.

This understanding of the Church's mission includes the numerical expansion of the believing community, but it is much wider and deeper. For example, the kingdom of God makes a significant advance when a drug addict repents and begins to lead a morally disciplined

life. Needless to say this kind of achievement is central to the Church's mission. What are we to say of the situation when for instance an organization like Amnesty International persuades the government of a non-christian country to release an innocent political prisoner who is a pagan? It would be hard to associate this directly with the Church's mission, yet clearly this kind of event constitutes the will of God, and hence it is an authentic advance of the kingdom. If the Church were to restrict itself to exclusively ecclesiastical preoccupations among the believers it would not be fulfilling its total mission, no matter how laudable were the achievements among the faithful. I suggest that the notion of serving as the instrument for advancing the kingdom takes account of the internal and external spheres of operation.

Without a doubt we are indebted to the liberation theologians for these wider perspectives. They have drawn our attention to something which should have been obvious all along, namely that the redemptive work of Christ is not confined to liberating people from their own sins and the consequences thereof. We are also to be liberated from the effects of other people's wickedness. It is simple when one reflects on it. Traditionally the classical paradigm of redemption has been the Exodus which was the liberation of the people from the consequences not of their own sins, but of other people's; namely the cruelty and greed of the Egyptians. The implications of this insight for the world of today are so far reaching as to be almost beyond numbering. In the light of this perspective I have no hesitation in including among agencies for the kingdom organizations such as the Samaritans, Amnesty International, peace movements like C.N.D., Oxfam, and countless charitable bodies. When the Church facilitates their operation, it is being true to its mission, not precisely by bringing in converts, but in the wider sense of advancing the kingdom of God.

At the end of the bible the Apocalypse has a pair of images which convey powerfully this understanding of the Church's mission. They are the symbols of Temple and City. Among ancient peoples including the Jews, it was understood that a god dwelt among his people in a temple. Jesus achieved the authentic realization of this aspiration literally in his body, and after the resurrection there was no need for any material temple built of bricks. The Apocalypse shows us the Holy City. God dwells in the profane world and makes it holy. Any suggestion of confining God and his activity to a sacred place like a temple is out of date. The whole world is the area in which the divine influence is to operate. The Church is not his prison, but the channel to bring his redeeming grace to the whole of the city.

Other imagery, equally eloquent, of the failure of the Church to

act for the kingdom, was supplied quite unconsciously in the television presentation of *Brideshead Revisited*. We saw there the perfect image of a Church which was faithful to a limited ecclesiastical mission, but something was clearly absent. The Catholics depicted in it observed the feasts, kept the fasts, obeyed the rules, but clearly they did not liberate themselves to the fulness of life although in the end some of them made the correct decisions. What was lacking was the whole dimension of the Church acting as the instrument of the kingdom, to extend the will of God among all people, and not just among the upper class Roman Catholics.

Earlier in this article I stated that the missionary work ought to be done by the laity, grouped into appropriate communities. What is it that will bring outsiders into these groups, and inspire them to join in the task of consciously advancing the kingdom? In previous generations theologians of great integrity like Newman and Knox entered the Roman Catholic Church for motives that could be described as the quest for a satisfactory ecclesiastical pedigree. It is my opinion that those considerations count for little in today's world. People of equal sincerity have been more impressed by the statement that 'by their fruits you shall know them'. They are looking for a community whose way of life produces the values of God's kingdom, in contrast to that of the *Brideshead* believers whose credentials were nevertheless impeccable, at any rate within a limited frame of reference. In simple terms it means that we must create groups whose community life is so good that outsiders will want to join. I cannot prove it, but I feel convinced that the mission is best served when the non-believers are seeking admission rather than when the believers are trying to convince them that they ought to join.

The kind of goodness which they ought to see in the community is clearly the life of charity, and also the more diffuse love of mankind which impels people to strive for a better society. For example it is admirable when people devote time to taking handicapped children on excursions which their own families might find too complicated to organize. Supernatural charity is equally present, though perhaps not quite so obvious, when people of goodwill try to ensure that there shall be no further build-up of nuclear weapons. The kingdom is being advanced in both types of activity.

Where does the parish fit in to this scenario? It seems strangely out of place. It is almost as if we were talking about a totally different ball game. In my opinion the mere existence of the well-loved Society of St Vincent de Paul implies that the parish in its normal working just does not do works of charity. I suggest that if the parish lived up to its real vocation as a christian community the S.V.P. would be superfluous, because charity is so basic to the heart of the

gospel message. I do not blame the laity or the clergy; both are the victims of the institution. It is very simple if we look at it critically. It may be no more than a matter of size. The average parish is so large that the people cannot really know one another. For reasons of reverence we do not talk in church, and the in-out process on a Sunday morning resembles the emptying of a theatre more closely than the intimacy of a dinner party. (Unless I am mistaken the eucharist ought to have some affinity with the latter model). Size, architecture, and the pattern of large liturgies all conspire to keep the people apart. We need to create communities whose intrinsic dynamism will bring human need into contact with the gospel message. This process must be effortless, natural, and one might almost say, automatic. We will have failed if it is necessary to add on to the normal community a whole network of other organizations so that people can meet, communicate and bring the Christian message to bear on the problems and challenges which are presented by everyday life. What possible contact is there between unemployment and the 11.30 Mass at St Swithun's, where the five hundred semi-strangers are lulled into somnolence by gothic gloom and the staggering dimensions of the church debt. The parish's inadequacy is even more apparent when we ask what it has contributed, not to works of charity, but to the task of re-shaping our society so that the average person's life expresses the will of God and not the damage of exploitation. Whereas most parishes have ancillary confraternities like the S.V.P., bodies like justice and peace groups are so unfamiliar as to arouse suspicion and even resentment in some places. If we reflect upon the humanitarian achievements of the last century or so, it is sadly apparent that the Catholic Church has made little contribution to any of them. Trade union reform, the enfranchisement of women, laws covering conscientious objection or the establishment of the National Health Service owed little to Christianity, and practically nothing to the efforts of the Catholic Church.

I do not accept the validity of excuses such as, for example, that we were but recently a persecuted minority, or poorly educated, and peopled mostly by unskilled workers. Minorities are extremely powerful in democratic societies provided that they are clear about their objectives, and it should have been our greatest boast that we had thousands of practising Catholics in coal mines, docks, and factories. All that was wrong was the fact that our parish structure did not help them to translate their faith into the realm of social justice, like trades union activity. This is just one example, but the principle applies to practically every area of human concern. If it be objected that I stress too much the ineptitude of the parish, then I

can only reply that the central responsibility lies there because it is the eucharistic community, and as such it is the central point where the normal believer gives deliberate expression to his religious convictions. If the eucharistic assembly and the community which it draws on do not provide the point of insertion for the gospel into the world, then it is difficult to devise a satisfactory substitute.

Thus far I have said little about the clergy. I wanted to clarify the shortcomings of the institution before considering their effects on the personnel. As I have stated before in this article, the activities of most individuals are shaped by the institutions within which they work. The parish is so much geared to the requirements of a holding operation that the clergy inevitably become just maintenance men. Realistic mission is effectively inhibited by the parish, with the result that authentic missionary work can be done only in spite of the structure and not because of it. Over the years various factors have aggravated the difficulty of the priest's position. The fact that he is supported financially by the parish, and does not earn his living like other men, has meant that the clergy have become inevitably a privileged class. This has been reinforced by conventions of clothing and titles, which are utterly irrelevant to the gospel, but which are powerful psychologically in creating a class ethos which cuts off the priests from the realities of ordinary life.

The process also goes back to the seminaries. The Council of Trent must be praised for having ensured something almost unique for those days, namely professional training. It meant that henceforth all the clergy of the Catholic Church would be professionally trained: they would not inherit the jobs, nor purchase them, nor drift into them through patronage. It was not the intention of the Council to isolate them from the universities, cities, or the rest of life, but somehow it just happened. When a young man enters a seminary he steps into a different world which is a sub-culture all of its own. He is destined for the society of the sacristy and the presbytery rather than for the market place, and the unrealism starts with his training. I do not think that anyone planned it that way, but it is as if the maintenance ethos of the parish has stretched its influence backwards into the seminary to ensure that the future clergy would fit into its narrow grooves without too much discomfort.

Some years ago I taught in a seminary for late vocations, and I was saddened by what I saw. The students came from the most varied backgrounds and had worked in the most diverse careers, sometimes having exercised great responsibility. In the seminary there was no provision for integrating their past experience with their future mission: that was the trouble, there was no real mission to look forward to, just the holding operation of a parish. Without

anything specific being said, the whole ethos of the seminary transmitted signals to them which indicated that their past skills would be irrelevant, so they might as well abandon the difficult task of integrating their past working life with their theology. After ordination these late vocations usually sank into the system as completely as the younger men, and the totally subordinate role of being a curate would ensure the completion of the seminary's work.

It should be clear from what I have said that the life of the priest requires re-orientation to enable him to give the kind of lead which a missionary Church demands. It is useless to attempt to change attitudes if the harmful structures remain untouched. For example, throughout the Middle Ages there were constant battles between Church and State about the control of appointments to bishoprics. All the reforms proved short-lived as long as the underlying structures were untouched. In that instance it meant that while the bishoprics were wealthy and carried political influence, the kings could not fail to be interested in their incumbents. Satisfactory reform and ecclesiastical control of the appointments had to await events like the French Revolution which stripped the bishops of both wealth and political influence. If we are to achieve something similar for the parochial clergy a large scale re-structuring will be needed, and for the planning of it we must work backwards.

The first step is the theological understanding of what the Church's mission consists of. Once that is clearly understood it should be possible to create the appropriate structures to carry it out. Only then will it be possible to plan the life and training of the priest so as to produce missionaries and not just maintenance men. The failure to go through these theological stages explains why so much post-conciliar seminary reform has amounted to little more than cosmetic alteration of the old system.

The great opportunity which the present day offers derives from the perception of what the correct eucharistic community ought to be. This is usually called the 'basic community' (which is a poor translation of the spanish *comunidad de base*). It is a group which is small enough for the members to know one another, and small enough not to require a large expensive building for its activities. It is sufficiently flexible to provide the environment for the laity's spiritual formation, works of charity, and also to put them in touch with society's needs. For instance, unemployment cannot be overlooked in a small informal group, whereas it can remain undetected among the parishioners at the 11.30 Mass at St Swithun's. This applies to their own lack of work (when unemployed) and to the wider problems of society at large.

What is the role of the priest in communities like these? Clearly

paternalism is out, as is dictatorship and the parish priest's black-thorn. The stick may be unfashionable now, even in St Swithun's, but the psychology still lurks there, rather like the old-time policemen and magistrates who would just love to bring back the birch. For such communities as I have described the priest must act as the animator or the facilitator, and his role will be one of co-ordination, ensuring that the talents and leadership qualities of the laity are developed and not suppressed or relegated to irrelevance.

Only when this way of life has been established and acknowledged will it be possible to re-shape the training. I therefore refrain from offering any advice as to how those priests might be formed; it is as yet too early in the British situation.

There is one other cause for hope (in addition to the existence of basic communities in many parts of the world): it is the prospect of a new Code of Canon Law. Clearly the old Code is out of date. I do not mean that its laws are irrelevant, but it does not, and could not embody the theology of Vatican II. It is the tradition of our Church that reforming Councils are followed by institutional reforms and legislation which embody the theological insights of the said Councils. In the wake of Vatican II this process is still incomplete. At the time of writing, the reformed Code has not yet been promulgated. It remains to be seen whether it will be an imaginative application of Vatican II to the modern Church, or merely a cosmetic operation upon the old Code of 1918. Let us be optimistic; at any rate the opportunity is present for a major advance in facilitating the mission of the Church.