

# Them Dry Bones

## Eamon Duffy

One of the Brothers at the Irish De La Salle school where I began my education had a brisk warm-up routine for frosty mornings. It consisted of a rapid-fire set of catechism questions round the class. If you faltered or made a mistake you got a ferocious slap on either hand with a whippy three-foot cane, and went to the back of the line to be questioned again. The remembered tingle of swollen finger-ends as the second inquisition drew near is still capable of bringing me out in a sweat. It is some testimony to the effectiveness of this pedagogic technique, however, that while I have now wholly forgotten the Brother's name, I have almost total recall of any question in the catechism, even at a distance of thirty years, and coasted through the first year of doctrine tutorials in my undergraduate theology degree-course on the strength of it—"I see that Duffy is the only member of the class who has actually *read* the Chalcedonian decrees".

Indeed, it was as an elaborate mnemonic device that I think I chiefly valued it. Not just the riveting stacatto crispness of the question and answer form, and not just the lapidary elegance and compression of many of the answers, which seemed then, and seem still, admirable—"What is prayer? Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God". Best of everything were all those wonderful lists: the three theological virtues and the four cardinal virtues, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost and the two great precepts of charity, the seven corporal works of mercy and the eight beatitudes, the seven deadly sins and the six sins against the Holy Ghost, the four sins crying to heaven for vengeance, the three eminent good works and the four last things.

The catechism stood for order, structure and coherence, underlying the often contradictory variety of experienced Catholicism, from the tinsel-bannered brilliance of May processions to the neo-jansenist rigours of the Irish confessional. It was, in a subconscious way, immensely important to me, and I suspect to many others, in the hectic and heady flux of the Sixties. Underneath the exciting and welcome transformations of liturgy, theology and structure, one knew, there stood the Real Thing. In due course there would be time for stock-taking, for a re-survey of the religious scene, which would reveal essentially the same grand contours, however

much the local flora and fauna had altered. And so it was with some impatience and indignation that I listened some years ago to my son's account of the huggy, lovey mush that seemed to constitute preparation for first communion at his otherwise admirable South London Catholic school. With a set countenance I took myself off to the nearest Catholic Truth Society book-stall to find a catechism, the hard bony structure which this sentimental fatty mess so patently lacked.

On re-reading it, after an interval of twenty years, I was appalled to find that it simply wouldn't do. The remembered distillation of the permanences of the Faith was revealed in all its historical specificity. This was partly because of the datedness of its social assumptions, with its talk of the duties of 'masters, mistresses and other superiors' to servants and dependents (Penny Catechism = PC 202, 233) and the quaint air of unreality that hung round its piety. What, for example, was the average married man or woman to make of the injunction that 'After my night prayers I should observe due modesty in going to bed; occupy myself with thoughts of death; and endeavour to compose myself to rest at the foot of the Cross, and give my last thoughts to my Crucified Saviour' (PC 370)? More fundamentally, the Penny Catechism was all too evidently the product of the age of the Council of Trent, of Counter-Reform, its priorities and emphases those of the fight against protestantism. If this was the skeletal structure of Catholicism, then it was like the skeletons of the long-bowmen found on the *Mary Rose*, with huge over developed shoulder and arm bones, and stunted bandy legs. Hence the questions on the Church were preoccupied with authority and obedience, infallibility, with the supremacy of the Pope. There was no account of the episcopate, or of the nature and meaning of ministry. Priesthood was discussed in terms of power and authority. Scripture was drawn on exclusively for knock-down proof-texts. Doctrines were less to be explained, than to be demonstrated. 'How do you *prove* that there is a Purgatory?' (PC 109). I had thought of the catechism as closely structured, strong on coherence. What struck me now was the atomistic presentation of doctrines there, most of them bearing no discernible relation to other doctrines except that they were imposed by the same authority. Sin was presented exclusively in terms of the breach of commands, so that atonement and forgiveness seemed arbitrary; there was no organic connection between the nature of sin and the means of restoration. Christ's resurrection (dealt with in two questions, one of them concerned with the keeping of Easter!) was simply something appropriately miraculous which Jesus, as God, had done (for according to the Penny Catechism, he simply raised himself from the dead, PC 66—67). The Immaculate Conception and Assumption were 'privileges' granted to the Blessed Virgin, isolating her from the rest of

redeemed humanity. The Christian life itself was presented essentially as the life of the individual, in which the liturgy featured very little, often as an *obligation*, or as a 'devotion', superior to but not different in kind from daily meditation or reading good books (PC 357–60). This religious isolation was reflected in the catechism's teaching on social morality, which was profoundly conservative and individualistic, its last word on the relationship between the governed and their governors being St. Paul's injunction 'Let every soul be subject to the higher powers; he that resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God', a sentiment which in a century that knew Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, or the modern states of Chile and South Africa, seemed to call for some gloss.

This, then, was no living, articulated skeleton, but the disjointed fossil of a once vigorous organism. In the Church of Peter Canisius, on whose catechism ours was closely modelled, a bellicose Catholicism had sought to expand with the aid of a drill-manual mentality and the strong arm of the Catholic monarch. If this was the catholic landscape of my youth, the bull-dozer had not arrived a moment too soon. The age of the catechism was gone, I concluded, for ever, and reluctantly surrendered my son to the well-intentioned bonelessness of his first communion class.

Father Herbert McCabe has shown how premature was any such dependency. His *New Catechism of Christian Doctrine* is a triumphant demonstration of the continuing vitality of the catechetical form, and this little book is the best brief guide to the theological and religious revolution of Vatican II known to me.

It should be said at once that it departs in many ways from catechetical tradition, at least in the form familiar to English Catholics. It is not, for example, designed to be learned by heart. Most of the mnemonic devices, such as the lists I so much relished, are absent, and the answers are less compressed and polished than in the Penny Catechism. Fr McCabe does sometimes approach the memorability of the older catechism, as in his q. 68, *What is a Sacrament?*: 'A Sacrament is a sacred sign by which we worship God, his love is revealed to us, and his saving work accomplished in us. In the Sacraments God shows us what he does and does what he shows us.' But by and large the answers are less memorably aphoritic than this, and are designed rather as starting points for discussion by catechist and catechumen. The catechism will therefore probably be found more useful for adults and older children than the very young.

More fundamentally, Fr McCabe abandons the traditional Canisian ordering of the catechism round Creed, Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary, commandments, sacraments, sins, virtues, gifts, beatitudes etc. All these elements find a place here, but they are incorporated within a carefully theologically articulated three-fold

structure:

1. *The Redemption*—essentially a scriptural account of the work of Creation and Redemption, in which the Scriptures themselves and their modes of story-telling are emphasized, rather than simply quarried for proof and illustrative texts.

2. *The Church*—a section in which the Sacraments are presented as the primary, interrelated ways in which men and women share the life of the Spirit, and not simply as discrete and distinct ‘means’ by which a substance known as ‘grace’ is applied to our ‘souls’.

3. *Life in the Spirit*, a systematic and marvellously refreshing account of the virtues, theological and cardinal, as modes of friendship with God begun in our Redemption in Christ and to be perfected in the Kingdom.

This third section is easily the most original and successful part of the catechism. Strongly based in the teaching of St. Thomas, it offers an account of the Christian life not as based in obedience to external commandments, but as the positive attempt to live the ‘fully human life’ achieved by Christ which is our destiny as members of his Body. This positive insistence on redemption as the restoration of true humanity is central to the whole catechism, and helps give it its coherence. God wants his ‘human creatures ... to flourish in a human way’. Life in the Spirit does not annihilate our human freedoms, but is their true source (qq. 2, 37). Sin is not the breaking of taboos, but the collective and individual failure of humanity to be ‘truly human’. This wholly traditional Thomist perspective results in some startling affirmative attitudes to human gifts and faculties, as in the opening of the answer to q. 247, *How can we fail in the exercise of chastity?* ‘We fail in the exercise of chastity by dislike and fear of sex...’ Indeed this whole section on the virtues is full of wonderfully vivid sanctified common-sense. A representative example is question 253:

253 *How can we fail in the exercise of good sense?*  
(Prudence)

We fail in good sense by the exercise of cunning to encompass bad ends as well as by foolishness while trying to do good; by all forms of unreasonableness, self-deception, bigotry, and prejudice; by pedantic legalism; by being doctrinaire; by voting ignorantly, irresponsibly or merely selfishly; by careless incompetence in the management of domestic affairs and by leading a life without any conscious purpose or meaning.

In this section, too, Fr McCabe’s well-known concern with the social and political dimensions of the Gospel, and his insistence that the

Church is called first of all to be the Church of the Poor, are very evident. Its trenchancy, but also its admirable theological balance, can be gauged from the answers to three questions:

189 *How can we fail in the virtue of hope?*

We can fail in the virtue of hope by neglecting our part in the sacraments and other prayers of the Church, by failing to ask God for the grace we need to remain in his friendship and by losing heart in our struggle against the powers of this world.

209 *Is almsgiving a special act of charity?*

Almsgiving is a special act of charity but a greater one is to struggle for a more just society in which it will be less necessary.

221 *What is an unjust society?*

An unjust society is one in which some section of the community is systematically exploited in the interests of another wealthy and powerful section. Although we must use every means in our power to liberate such a society, we know that, because of original sin, any society will be in some respects unjust until the coming of the Kingdom.

The theological strength of the catechism as a whole is its scriptural rootedness in the love of God for mankind, revealed in Christ, and our corporate sharing through the Spirit in his Trinitarian life. The love of God for us was not even mentioned in the Penny Catechism till almost half-way through (PC 149). By contrast, the opening section of Fr. McCabe's catechism is headed 'God and his love for us', and this is the theme round which the whole work is organised (cf. qq. 4, 5, 10, 23, 36 etc). The all-pervasiveness of the *Trinitarian* theme, drawn out 'as we meditate in faith on the deepest meaning of life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the mysteries of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost' (q. 31), is clearest in the long section on the sacraments, but can perhaps be most readily appreciated by a comparison of the questions on Grace and on Faith in the Penny Catechism and in McCabe.

PC 139 *What is grace?*

Grace is a supernatural gift of God, freely bestowed upon us for our sanctification and salvation.

- McCabe 35 *What do we call our receiving of the Holy Spirit by which we are joined to Jesus as children of the Father and thus share the divine life?*  
We call this receiving of the Holy Spirit sanctifying grace.
- PC 9 *What is faith?*  
Faith is a supernatural gift of God, which enables us to believe without doubting whatever God has revealed.
- McCabe 154 *What is faith?*  
Faith is a divinely given disposition of the mind, by which we begin to share in God's understanding of himself: in faith, we think of the history of mankind and our own life-story as centred on the love of God for us as revealed in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.

In McCabe, the sacraments are presented not simply as religious rites which effect certain benefits, but are set firmly within a christological and ecclesial context which emphasizes their unity and interrelatedness.

69 *What is the first sacrament?*

The first sacrament is the humanity of Jesus, 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15). The second is the Church herself, 'the sacrament of union with God and of the unity of mankind' (*Lumen Gentium, 1*).

Baptism is presented not simply as the cleansing from sin emphasised by the Penny Catechism, but as the commencement of a new life and a 'sacramental sharing in the priesthood of Christ', which had not even been mentioned in the Penny Catechism. The sixteenth-century polemical strait-jacket which had limited the Penny Catechism's account of the Eucharist largely to sacrifice and real presence is put aside, and though both of these themes are clearly taught, they are set in a far broader ecclesial perspective. The tone is caught in the first question on the eucharist.

75 *What is the greatest sacrament of the Church?*

The greatest sacrament of the Church is the Eucharist: the sacred meal in which the unity of

the Church in love is symbolised and effected, the sacrifice of Christ is recalled and the future unity of mankind in the Kingdom is anticipated.

The same concern with the ecclesial and universal context of belief is evident in the treatment of the Virgin Mary, discussed—as in *Lumen Gentium*—in the framework of the Church. She is treated not as a unique but as a representative figure, ‘for she is the type or image of our mother the church and shows us, in her life, what God does for those he loves and redeems’. Her Assumption is therefore not some bizarre special privilege, but the anticipation of *our* ‘liberation from death, our resurrection’. The potential of this emphasis for a recovery of an authentically scriptural and patristic mariology to replace the sacriligious sentimentalities of so much Marian piety hardly needs stressing.

One could go on developing a point by point comparison between the new and the old catechism. In almost every respect Fr McCabe’s seems to me immensely superior. There are of course some omissions and idiosyncrasies. I myself found his distinction between the ‘mystery of the Church’ and the ‘mystery of grace’ effected in the sacraments (q. 72) difficult, and I have doubts about its catechetical usefulness. Some of the more technical questions on the Trinity do not seem to me to do much to illuminate that mystery (qq. 25—7, 30). But English Catholics can count themselves lucky to have been provided with so magnificent a catechism as this, not least, in its ecumenical balance, as a means of mediating the renewed self-understanding of post-conciliar Catholicism to other English-speaking Christians. It is also a work which, like its penny predecessor, can on occasion rise to moments of real spiritual intensity. George Herbert, no mean authority, thought that catechisms should *not* try to do this, for ‘questions cannot inflame or ravish; that must be done by a set, and laboured, and continued speech’. At least in his final section, appropriately on *The Last Things*, McCabe gives Herbert the lie, and rises to grandeur.

258 *Is death terrible?*

Even though by the power of the Spirit we accept death in Christ it is still terrible; for by death, we are stripped of all that attached us to the things of this world; and it is the more terrible, the more we have allowed ourselves to be attached to them.

262 *Do we die alone?*

We do not die alone, unless we reject God’s love

and mercy. We die in Christ, in the presence of God and in the company of our fellow-Christians. Our mother the Church stands with us in death as the mother of Jesus stood by the cross. This is the meaning of Viaticum and the Church's prayers for the dead.

263 *To what are we destined beyond death?*

All the faithful are destined beyond death to the resurrection, when the Kingdom of God will be finally established and we shall live our own real bodily lives, transfigured by the Spirit and, in Christ, share the Father's eternal life of understanding and joy. This is called heaven.

- Herbert McCabe OP : *The Teaching of the Catholic Church: a New Catechism of Christian Doctrine*. Catholic Truth Society, London, 1985. 80p.

## **Raised a Spiritual Body: bodily resurrection according to Paul**

Margaret Pamment

*Given at a seminar on 'The self in religion and philosophy'  
at Bristol University, 1984'*

The aim of this study is to understand what Paul means by his statement about the resurrection in I Corinthians 15:44: 'It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body'. We must examine Paul's use of the terms body (*soma*), physical (*psychikon* and *psyche*) and spiritual (*pneumatikon* and *pneuma*). One of the fullest recent expositions of Pauline usage is Robert Jewett's *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Brill 1971), which criticises idealistic treatments of the subject and seeks definitions in particular historical settings. This is a sensible approach to the subject, since it allows for both development and contradiction, but it meets with the difficulties that we do not know for certain which of the epistles attributed to Paul are really Pauline; and we know neither in what circumstances

**372**