

FATHER AND SHEPHERD

A talk given to the clergy of Venice at a Diocesan Synod, November, 1957, by the patriarch, Cardinal Roncalli, our present Pope.¹

MY dear brothers in the priesthood of Christ: For a long time now I have wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with you. Up to now I have been following all that you do and I am very pleased and bless the Lord for all the good that is in you. In public, as you know, I am happy to bear witness to your excellent spirit and to the work which you accomplish. It is with joy that I give even more abundant testimony of this in the presence of the Holy Father, Vicar of Christ on earth and head of the whole Catholic family. I did so last year on the occasion of my first *ad limina* visit. I received in return words of encouragement and comfort for us all. That audience of June 8th, 1956, has left a deep impression of good-will on the part of the Holy Father and, on our side, of filial devotion to his august person. On that occasion we offered to the Holy Father a mosaic of our first patriarch, St Laurence Justinian. This image will always be there to remind them of us at the Vatican.

It is to the intercession of St Laurence Justinian, with whom I feel myself united in spirit by prayer, that I attribute the consolations of this synod. I hope that it will complete worthily the pastoral work, modest, like my strength, but coming from the heart, that the Lord has allowed me to accomplish during the five years that I have been bishop in this dear land of St Mark.

During the three exhortations which the *Liber Pontificalis* allows and encourages me to deliver for our common good I propose to speak briefly and as though conversing with you. I hope in this to be guided by St Laurence Justinian and by another, nearer in time and therefore more alive to us, St Pius X.

I am going to talk to you about the office of patriarch, about his duties towards those who work with him and about what they in turn should render him.

I will keep for tomorrow some thoughts on that priestly dignity which is yours. I shall consider it in relation to the Lord, to you yourselves, and to the Church.

¹ This translation is made from the French text of *Documentation Catholique*, December 21 1958, by kind permission of the editor.

On the third day we shall examine together our duties to our people and find out what they expect of us.

There will, then, be three themes, the patriarch, his clergy, and the Christian people.

The Spiritual Fatherhood of the Bishop

The Roman pontifical, my guide in matters liturgical and pastoral, speaks thus of the patriarch in the *Ordo ad Synodum* which I have open before me. 'Most dear brothers and priests of the Lord. You are the helpers of our order. However unworthy we may be, we occupy the place of Aaron while you hold that of Eleazar and Ithamar. We stand in the place of the twelve apostles, while you take that of the seventy-two disciples. We are pastors set over you all, while you have charge of those souls whom we have confided to you. We have to give an account of you to the Lord Jesus, supreme shepherd, but you are only answerable to him for the people entrusted to you.'

It is customary in the liturgy to add to the bishop's name the title 'father and lord'. But in the language of the gospel, in that of Christian tradition dating from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, in the everyday speech of Christian folk throughout the centuries, and in modern pastoral practice, the duties of a bishop are expressed in two words, not 'father and lord' but 'father and shepherd'.

I will speak frankly and with all simplicity. Five years ago the Holy Father, overlooking my unworthiness, sent me to you. Withdrawing me from the direct service of the Holy See he sent me as patriarch of Venice, bishop, that is, of a specific part of Christ's flock. The task was one not unfamiliar to me. For ten years, before being sent to France in the diplomatic service, I had been employed under holy obedience at Constantinople, the modern Istanbul. Here I fulfilled the duties of apostolic delegate for all the Catholics, of whatever rite, in this immense area of the Middle East. I was at the same time apostolic administrator with ordinary powers over the Catholics of the Latin rite.

I remember having put up in the rooms where I lived the words 'father and shepherd'. Of these the more important title is that of father.

The full force of this can be understood in the light of the expression which St Paul uses to defend his rights as a father in

the spirit against the encroachments of any other teaching authority whatever. 'You may have ten thousand schoolmasters in Christ, but not more than one father: it was I that begot you in Jesus Christ, when I preached the gospel to you' (1 Cor. iv, 15).

For many the name of 'father' applied to a bishop is bound up with the memory of some act of kindness which has touched them. For others, for the truly zealous, the bishop is 'father' in the sense that he is entirely given over to the service of charity in his diocese. They have some idea of the burden of care and worry, of trials of all sorts, which the government of a diocese today involves. They know that at the head there is someone who bears in God's sight the responsibility for the eternal salvation of thousands of souls, and who has the means to bring this about.

It is the father who has to fulfil unceasingly the task of feeding his children on the spiritual food which they must have lest they fall on the hard road which is life in this world. He it is who must protect them against the dangers which menace faith, unity, and life itself. It is the father who after having, in the words of St Paul, given birth to his children, begets them a second time by assuring their Christian upbringing so that they may be freely guided in their family and social life by Christian principles.

There is a concept of the spiritual fatherhood of the bishop which is loftier still. Properly understood it is an expression of true fatherly authority. It is not imposed from outside by some external force. It is not a mere juridical power of domination. It is a service of love, of daily devotion and abnegation, of brotherly love in helping one another which animates the family of the children of God.

The code of canon law itself reminds bishops that they are pastors of souls and that they should govern their flocks not in order to exercise dominion over them, but so as to love them as sons and brothers.

Beyond all this there is a yet higher plane where the teaching of the Church on the origins of the spiritual fatherhood of the bishop reaches its culminating point.

Here we touch upon a mystery. It is revealed that the Heavenly Father, infinitely good and merciful, always just and transcendent in his majesty, has nevertheless out of love taken the initiative in the great work of our redemption.

'God so loved the world that he gave up his only begotten

Son' (John iii, 16). The word 'give' refers to three manifestations of the divine goodness.

1. The mediation of the Word of God made flesh on behalf of man.

2. The setting up of the Church as the family of the children of God.

3. The formation, within the Church, of a hierarchy *ubi humana divinis junguntur* as a visible sign of God's fatherhood.

Many people, when they speak of spiritual fatherhood, think somewhat as follows: Up above there is our Father in heaven, far removed from men but overshadowing them with his paternal providence. Down below human beings struggle with the difficulties of life.

But that is not exactly what Christianity teaches. What is fundamental is that in the centre between God and man you have Jesus Christ, God made man, the unique and necessary mediator. 'No man can go to the Father save through me' (John xvi, 6).

Jesus is the way. He is the supreme gift of the Father. For the Christian what matters is to be incorporated in Christ and to be united to him. The Son of God will make each baptized person a member of his body, setting up a family relationship, that of a son, between him and his heavenly Father. This way of expressing it was so dear to St Paul that he used it 164 times in his letters.

From this the rest develops. In his Son, made man, the heavenly Father calls his creatures to life with him as in a family. The Son came down on earth to set up the organization of family life in that society which we call the Church. From this come the social and community characteristics which are essential to Catholicism.

The Church is not simply an exterior help and guide. It is in and through her that God's fatherhood is extended to us, from the Father to the Son, and from the Son, head of the body, his Church, to us, its members. The Church is then in truth the family of God (cf. Eph. iii, 19).

If she is a family, there is authority within her organized according to rank. In this hierarchy there will be a chief, there will be subordinate commanders, and there will be the general body of her members. In the unique body, the whole Christ which is the Church, all are closely linked to one another. There is the visible head, the pontiff who represents Christ, the head invisible to human eyes, who lives on as his grace flows through the

members. There are successors to the apostles, those who share in the apostolic ministry from the highest to the humblest rank, and there are all those who share the divine life.

It is in this wonderful structure, this living organism, that the paternity of the bishop finds its proper place. The patriarch and all the bishops in the different parts of the world are associated with Christ in a ministry at once sublime and awe-inspiring, but in which all who show themselves worthy will have the help of divine grace.

Our reasoning, my dear colleagues, clear and easy to follow, has led us to those heights where are to be found those ideas which go to make up the notion of a bishop as father. From this vantage point it is both easy and natural to look at the relations between the father and those, both clergy and people, who are under his authority.

It is at this point that the personal views of your patriarch on his duties and responsibilities will have their place.

The Council of Trent declares that 'the bishops, who have succeeded to the place of the apostles, belong in a more special way to the hierarchic order than do the other ranks of the clergy and are set up, as the same apostle (St Paul) says, to rule the Church of God' (Sess. XXIII, ch. 4).

The words of the martyred St Ignatius are always impressive. 'Be subject to the bishop as to the Lord. Let all obey the bishop even as the Lord Jesus Christ obeyed the Father' (*Ep. ad Smyrn*).

Stronger still are the declarations concerning the exercise of episcopal authority towards the clergy and people. I have come across some vigorous observations on the subject in a recent book by my good friend Mgr Guerry, archbishop of Cambrai, entitled *L'Evêque* (Fayard, 1956). In it he says that the bishop must avoid two extremes, which he calls authoritarianism and paternalism.

Authoritarianism stifles all life. It implies a rigid external discipline and minute harassing regulations which leave no place for legitimate initiative. It cannot listen to others and it confounds harshness with firmness and lack of suppleness with dignity.

Paternalism is counterfeit fatherliness. It keeps its subjects on leading-strings so as the better to uphold its authority. It makes a show of its liberality, yet it does not feel obliged to respect the rights of its subordinates. It speaks in a patronizing manner and it will not accept collaboration with others.

True fatherly spirit in a bishop, on the other hand, respects above all the rights of others, and is very ready to develop in his sons the true liberty of the children of God. It is filled with kindness to all but reacts vigorously against anything which may render souls slaves to passion. With energy and foresight it inveighs against every error, danger and illusion. In dealing with the faithful it shows at the same time confidence and prudence, firmness and compassion, patience and the capacity to take decisions.

What may be said of the special relations of a bishop with his priests? The foundation of a bishop's fatherly power is the apostolic mandate. This joins bishop and priests in a common destiny, sharing the same motives, and the same pastoral work. There is nothing in this world more edifying and more joyful than a diocese where the relations between bishop and clergy are open, serene, and based on respect for one another.

A good and wise bishop knows how to bring into being an atmosphere in which his priests are at one with him in pastoral charity, in his plans for action, in his desire for unity in Christ and under his vicar the pope, in his work for the sanctification of souls and in his very thoughts. Such union plunges all into an atmosphere of apostolic charity towards God and towards the souls in whom dwells the Holy Spirit. The life of a priest weighed down by good work and advancing years is at the same time a foretaste and a guarantee of heaven.

In conclusion, my dear brethren and colleagues in the priesthood, you must allow me, in the words of St Paul (Eph. iii, 14), to fall on my knees before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that Father from whom all fatherhood on heaven and earth takes its title, that he, out of the rich treasury of his glory, strengthen you through his Spirit with a power that reaches your innermost being, and that Christ may find a dwelling-place in your hearts.

At the same time, in the words of the aged Samuel, almost at the end of his life, I beg a special prayer of you. 'Speak to me in the Lord's presence and in that of his Anointed', for this 25th of November, the opening day of the diocesan synod, marks also the beginning of the seventy-seventh year of my life. No compliments are called for—I am old and white-haired. But I can say 'Here I am, O Lord' (1 Sam. xii). I am ready to cross to the other side. It would certainly be a joy to live longer among such good

sons as you, but I do not ask for a minute longer than the time that providence has allocated to me.

All that I demand of your filial piety is that you pray for me to be faithful right to the end to those principles, characteristic of a father and a bishop, which I have set before you today, like Samuel of whom we read:

'Here was a prophet of proved loyalty, and ever his word came true, such vision had he of the God that gives light . . . there must be an end at last to his life and to the age he lived in; but first he would make profession with the Lord and his Anointed for witnesses' (Eccli. xiv, 18-22).



SAINT DOMINIC¹

FELIX WATTS, O.P.

Doth not wisdom cry aloud and prudence put forth her voice? Standing in the top of the highest places, by the way, in the midst of the paths, beside the gates of the city, in the very doors she speaketh, saying, O men, to you I call, and my voice is to the sons of men! O little ones, understand subtilty, and ye unwise take notice! Hear, for I will speak of great things, and my lips shall be opened to preach right things. My mouth shall meditate truth and my lips shall hate wickedness. (Prov. viii, 1-7.)

MY dear brothers and sisters in St Dominic: I think that the Dominican vocation is the hardest of all, because it is the vocation of an apostle. It is true that all of us suffer from the results of Adam's sin. We can cry with the apostle of the Gentiles, 'Who is weak, and I am not weak?' We are all engaged in the struggle with our adversary, who goes about, like a roaring lion, to devour us. There is no Christian vocation, no Christian life, which does not bid or require us to do battle with the devil. But, whereas some may overcome him by flight, others by patient and silent endurance, and others may derive refreshment in the battle from the protection and seclusion of the cloister; the friar preacher is required to go like Samson, and fall upon the lion with his bare hands; and (seemingly impossible feat) to rend it, as one

¹ A sermon preached to the Dominican Tertiary Congress at Hawkesyard in August, 1958.