

## THE CATHOLIC EVIDENCE GUILD IN THE POTTERIES

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### I

IT is 1936—or could be '39, or '29, or any of the pre-war years. The Catholic Evidence Guild speaker, in the market square, is surrounded by a motley crowd; some noisy, and angrily putting their point of view; others genuinely interested, and asking a carefully-thought-out question; some frankly bored, but hoping for blood to enliven the proceedings.

How many of us were familiar with the scene—and few of us realized the full significance of what we saw.

A speaker? Yes, we saw the speaker—heard him too—and were impressed with his lively answer, and obvious desire to impart his own love for his faith, to those who would listen to him. We rather wished that we had his courage, or his gifts, or both. But we didn't see the point of his speaking in the market square; it wasn't quite respectable, not the sort of thing that a real Catholic would drag his faith to. Pity he couldn't find a better outlet for his talents; maybe one day he would: anyhow we hoped so; this sort of caper just didn't do any *good*, you see.

Later on, years later, perhaps, we came across the odd person who had been influenced by the C.E.G., and had joined the Church. Very often we would find that the convert had himself graduated to the platform, and our discovery would bring about a vague sense of uneasiness, in that we wondered whether we, too, ought to have had some share in the work.

But the *speaker*—what did he *do* in his daily life? What sort of impact did this articulate, heckle-trained oddity have on those he met in the factory, in the office, and the pub? We had heard him with his crowd. Was it possible that the moment he dismounted his platform he relapsed into cloistered silence, and that, like the scout who had 'done his good turn today', he had no further interest in the conversion of England?

What an opportunity missed, if he did!

Here was a contact man; one of the finger-tips of the mystical body of Christ; trained, knowledgeable, confident. Projected by

circumstances into a non-Catholic environment, and revelling in the prospects. A light to the revelation of the gentiles.

How did he work? What results did he get? *How many converts did he get?*

The answers are fairly simple. He certainly got very few converts; sometimes he was fortunate, and helped in some way to direct an acquaintance to the true Church. But the nature of the job in hand was not primarily to direct people to the Church, but to get them first of all to believe in God at all. Small use talking to a man about infallibility when he hasn't got round to real conviction about the existence of God. Or about Mary being truly the Mother of God when he doesn't by any means think that Christ himself is God.

The guildsman's job has not so much been that of a seed-scatterer as that of a ploughman, preparing the ground for the seed which is to come. Breaking down prejudice, by showing that the Church has an *answer* to non-Catholic doubts; bringing the unbeliever to be conscious of life beyond the grave; teaching him to recognize the voice of his own conscience, and teaching him the child's act of contrition—just in case. Getting him to *pray*: maybe he has not prayed for years. Teaching him respect for his own faculties, in love and marriage. Letting him see justice, not merely in words, but in business judgments. Living with him. Loving him. Leading him; praying for him; hoping for him; identifying yourself with him; understanding him; realizing his background and training; respecting his sincerity, and realizing his potential holiness and greatness. Showing above all that the Catholic Church *cared* about him.

And so it went on. Once a week, or sometimes twice, the apostle of the market square would emerge, and perform in public. But far more important always was the hidden, daily life of private contact; hidden with the life of prayer—for to every guildsman has been made evident, not from infused knowledge, or especially enlightened understanding, but from bitter personal experience, the truth that of himself he can do nothing.

Daily mass, where possible, is an essential to guild activity, and has always been so, from the nature of the calling; and with daily mass daily living, in the presence of God; and with that, a hope that something of the hidden life will show itself, and have some attraction for those around.

## II

As the years went by, and the war came along, the guildsman was acquiring a fund of knowledge. Not just knowledge of his faith, but knowledge of those towards whom his efforts were directed. And with that knowledge, a realization that there existed no tailor-made answer to the question of conversion—for surely every person that he met was a study on his own. Some believed in God; some didn't; some read the gospels; most didn't. Some had moral problems holding them back, long after intellectual conviction had been attained. Others had reached standards of holiness which might be envied, and just didn't get the gift of faith. Each *person* must be understood.

With this understanding came a desire to identify himself more and more with the non-Catholic mind; and with the war, and the aftermath of war, came the opportunity.

By a strange paradox, it was the dwindling crowds, a decrease experienced at all types of outdoor meetings, which gave the C.E.G. new opportunities of supplementing outdoor by indoor activity. The scheme was *personal contact with non-Catholic groups* and *personal contact with Catholic societies*, this latter with a view to training other Catholics in contact-work.

Personal contact with non-Catholic groups sprang always from personal friendship, or works contact, with individuals. The first was an accident, in that a Methodist group once found itself without a speaker for its weekly meeting. The friendly Catholic—who also happened to be a C.E.G. speaker—was asked, in desperation, to deputize. 'Something non-controversial, of course', was the instruction.

Tongue in cheek, I suggested 'The Appeal of Catholicism', and received the horrified rejection anticipated. Eventually a slightly disturbed and anxious friend settled for 'The Church and Social Justice'. This was far and away from normal guild curriculum, but it was a way in, and the opportunity could not be missed.

The meeting was a great success; here was a *plan*; here was something which the Methodist group could understand. Here was the Church in action. Questions were plentiful. As I happen also to be a works manager, I could illustrate the application of the principles of the social encyclicals from experience in the factory. As an introduction and a contact, the evening was

invaluable. Confidence was established that the Church was almost Christian, and this was a real step forward.

'Would the speaker come again?'

To that there could be but one answer.

The second meeting followed a few weeks later. This time the subject was left to me, and in order to develop the spirit of enquiry in the audience, I chose 'The use of reason in arriving at a knowledge of God'. This covered the proofs for his existence, and the attributes of God, and 'went over big'. Certainly there was an abundance of questions, and again it was evident that the delivery of solid teaching was a new experience for the audience.

A statement from one of those present will indicate the point: 'Why don't *we* study our faith like this? Surely our faith would be *strengthened* if we tackled it in the same way.'

The meeting was lively, but friendly. When I met one of the listeners a week later, it was a tonic to hear that the subject-matter of the talk had been used as the basis for the Sunday sermon.

Still we were only on the fringe of things, and an awful lot of ground to cover. Friendships were growing; I began to know members of the group by name. They treated me with courtesy and respect, but far more important was my coming to realize that here were a body of men doing all that they could to lead the Christian life. They were sincere; they were real; they had virtue of a high order; they were genuinely interested in the things of God. Their weekly gathering together to study sacred things was a challenge to any comparable body of Catholic men.

A third meeting was arranged before I left the hall; here was a new experience for the C.E.G. Non-Catholics *asking* me to speak! Subject? 'The Resurrection of Christ.' The ground was extending. So was the audience, for it was announced that for the next talk, members of a neighbouring Methodist church were to be invited. It all seemed too good to be true.

The resurrection talk coincided with Easter, and again was treated objectively. Evidence for and against the doctrine; the normal Catholic exposition from the scriptures; chapter and verse; our Lord's foretelling of his resurrection; the teaching of the apostles; the facts as recounted in the gospels; the attacks on the doctrine; the 'swoon theory'; the 'hallucination theory'; the problem of the empty tomb; did the Romans steal the body of our Lord, or did the Jews, or the apostles—and so on.

The result exceeded all hopes. There was genuine pleasure among those present at the Church's treatment of the central fact of Christianity. There were questions on the resurrection of our Lord, and many more on our own resurrection, and, following on from that, many questions on the Church's teaching on heaven and the beatific vision. When could I come again?

By now there was a 'Jack and Bill' relationship, and a growing audience—for before the next meeting there came a written request for the C.E.G. speaker to address the birthday meeting of the largest group of men in local Methodist circles, at the local Central Hall.

This was a 'Sunday best' night, with refreshments, musical items and all, and with the Catholic speaker as the main attraction. Here the requested topic was 'The position of men in the Church'.

The title was wide enough to admit of anything, and I treated it under three headings, namely: study; prayer; and work.

Under 'study' came the use of reason in arguing from the things around us to the things of God; the use of the highest faculty of intelligence in the service of God. The study of the scriptures, with a new thought on old scenes (Have I ever before really got the full message out of this or that particular scene?). One scene treated in detail, the case of the palsied man, let down through the roof to Christ; what did I really make of this? I thought I knew the piece, but had I ever before really got to the depths of its implications?—and so on.

Then the Catholic idea of prayer. The whole of life one continuous act in the presence of God. The morning offering. The simplicity of meditation; an illustration of the translation of a scene in our Lord's life into terms of action in my own. Sorrow for sin; a short act of contrition. The rosary wasn't mentioned at this stage, nor was the mass. The listeners were first of all to get the basic idea of the Catholic mind on union with God; timing is the essence of success in developing the Church's mind to the non-Catholic; patience, and a firm determination not to rush the moment, must always be observed.

Work followed prayer, as the logical expression of the person's loving service of Christ. Here the activities of the various orders of the Church illustrated the point of good works flowing naturally from a life of prayer. Care for the poor, and the sick; teaching; the dignity of manual labour; the relationship between

the thirty years of our Lord's hidden life, and the three of his active ministry. The Christian ideal of work done to the glory of God.

Again there were lots of questions; some members of the audience were a little sceptical of the use of the mind in approaching the things of God; surely the heart was the important thing? Then came a whole series of questions about the religious orders of the Church. Why didn't religious *work*? How did they spend their time all day?—and all the usual questions which seem to come on this topic. This was a magnificent opportunity; there was real interest in the question, and before long one of the members had suggested that he would like to visit a monastery to see something of the life which was led there. The point was taken up by others, until, to the great delight of the speaker, it was suggested that there would be sufficient interested to make up a 'bus load. The visit was arranged, and, at the time of writing, is due to take place in one week's time; the entire strength of the local C.E.G. is being mustered for the occasion, and a strengthening of friendly relations is certainly anticipated. Only in such an atmosphere can progress in understanding be made.

[A party of thirty-six Non-conformists, 'chaperoned' by eighteen C.E.G. members, visited Hawkesyard Priory on June 20th. They heard a lecture from the editor on 'The Religious Life', were shown round the priory, and attended compline, following the psalms in their Bibles. They had tea and supper at Spode House, our adjacent retreat house, at which they sang their own grace. They stayed till 9.15, entertaining us with songs and hymns sung with great gusto, and we parted the best of friends.—ED.]

Two other addresses to Methodist groups followed the meeting referred to above. The first was on the 'Divinity of Christ'; the second on the internal evidence showing the historical value of St John's gospel.

The divinity talk brought out the points which have so often been evident at outdoor C.E.G. meetings, namely, the importance of defining the meanings of the words we use, and the need for a very clear understanding of the non-Catholic mind on the subject. Patience in dealing with statements such as, 'Co-equal, yes; but not the same in dignity'. Or with the more usual one: 'God, yes, we agree that Jesus Christ was God, but not God in the way that *you* mean'.

Patience was the only way. Trying to get them to forget odd texts, and to see the whole picture which a careful relation of texts alone will show; the Christian tradition for over a thousand years before the reformation. I was made vividly aware of the difficulties confronting the sincere non-Catholic who is genuinely seeking for the truth; for when he is faced with a difficulty, doubt follows upon doubt. This was very clearly illustrated on this occasion, as the members present gradually emphasized their doubts about the historical value of St John's gospel; plainly the only way out of the difficulties brought up in their minds by the Catholic doctrine was to doubt the accuracy of St John's record. Along these lines, the discussion continued until nearly ten o'clock, when even Methodist audiences begin to look thirsty, and it was agreed to adjourn the discussion until the following week.

The minutes which preceded the next week's talk were classic, from a Catholic point of view, for there, point by point, a very able secretary had established every item in the Catholic exposition; the points had certainly been understood, and this, at least, was heartening. Strangely enough, discussion was slow and difficult, and the chairman gladly agreed to the speaker's suggestion that he should give reasons, from the internal evidence of St John's gospel, for accepting it as historically accurate, as well as inspired. The treatment followed the traditional pattern, beginning with references which showed that the writer of the fourth Gospel was (a) a Jew, as evidenced in his familiarity with the Jewish law; (b) that he was a Jew of Palestine, as shown by his intimate knowledge of the detailed Palestinian geography. That he was an eye-witness of the events which he relates; that he was an apostle; finally, that he was John the son of Zebedee.

After this, the discussion flowed freely. It would be foolish to say that the audience was convinced, either about the historicity of St John's Gospel, or about the Catholic teaching on the divinity of Christ, but what can be said with accuracy is that they were *impressed* with the Catholic case. 'We only want the truth', as one member put it. Let us say at least that they realized that there *was* a case. Relations were still good, even though there were differences in belief; on each side there was complete respect for the other's integrity; and most of all they realized the Church had something to offer, and something substantial at that.

That is how the Methodist story stands at this moment. What precisely the future holds is uncertain, but it does hold promise and opportunity. Already the C.E.G. have a booking to address a Methodist meeting in November, a booking made six months in advance, and this a new group.

The guild apparently is 'on the Circuit'.

### III

What of other non-Catholic fields? Here again, the accent is on personal contacts through works or office association with non-Catholic friends.

The Anglican meeting was such a case.

It was Church Reunion week; the Anglican vicar in a village just outside the city was determined to do his bit, and invited the members of a neighbouring Methodist church to attend a joint meeting, to be addressed by a speaker from each group. A few days before the appointed date, it was realized that the meeting lacked something, and that the 'something' was a Catholic speaker. One parishioner knew someone, who knew someone else, who knew a Catholic who would speak. The Catholic was a C.E.G. man, and, of course, accepted the invitation with alacrity.

The day of the meeting came, and an assembly of seventy or eighty people—one Catholic in the audience—awaited events. Each speaker was allowed ten minutes to address the audience (the Anglican speaker took half an hour), after which there was a general questions session.

The Anglican speaker was the vicar's wife, and if the reader has in mind the typical caricaturist's version of a vicar's wife, tall, angular, with dated coat, and shapeless hat, then the idea must be corrected, for here was a vicar's wife with a difference. She was young, fashionable, and an able speaker. She had a degree in theology, and appeared to have read every Catholic writer from apostolic times. Her first sentence, which caused her husband the vicar not the slightest embarrassment, almost made the Catholic representative choke. 'I will now state the Anglican position', she began, 'if indeed I can say that we *have* a position.' She then proceeded to trace the Catholic doctrine of the assumption of our Lady, back to the fourth century. (This was her speech on behalf of the Anglican Church.) Evidently she was worried about the development of doctrine; certainly in her comments she was



at pains to be scrupulously fair, and was reading herself, without doubt, eventually, into the Church. Her concluding statement was as interesting as her first. 'In my opinion', she said, 'the Anglican Church, in the next twenty-five years, will cease to exist as a separate institution.' She did not enlighten her audience as to the manner in which this was to be brought about.

The questions followed the usual sort of pattern, most of them directed at the Catholic speaker. The mass; transubstantiation; prayers to our Lady; development of doctrine; Catholics' refusal to take part in non-Catholic services; the validity of orders; was there any salvation outside the Catholic Church; purgatory, and so on.

The meeting after the meeting was even more interesting, for then the real questioners went to work in private conversation, and said that many previous misconceptions had been cleared away in the course of the evening. Another meeting was promised, but so far this has not materialized.

Then there was the Inter-'Varsity Club meeting. Here, there was a Methodist minister, a Salvation Army speaker, and a Catholic, and general questions to follow. Again (and this happens whenever the forum conditions prevail) most of the questions were directed to the Catholic. The accent was naturally on science and philosophy, and all the usual ground was covered. What was the Church's teaching on evolution? How did modern geological opinion fit in with the Church's teaching on Genesis. Was not the Christian idea of God one of subjective projectivism, of building up our own idea of God and then making all the evidence fit the picture? Then came a question which was new, even to the C.E.G.—about the evolution of God!

The chairman for the evening, and a model chairman at that, summed up delightfully by saying: 'I came an agnostic. I go an agnostic. But I go an *enlightened* agnostic.' At least he had a sense of humour.

#### IV

So much for the C.E.G. speaker in his round of speaking to non-Catholic audiences. What of his activities from within the audience—surely a telling method of spreading interest in Catholic teaching?

The first case to register is that of a debate, under the auspices of the W.E.A., between a professor of the local University College, and a local Methodist minister, on scientific humanism. The parish priest, in whose area the meeting was to be held, asked the evidence guild to attend the meeting—to infiltrate, as he put it—so that the Catholic point of view could be put before the audience.

The infiltration was in the best Communist tradition, in ones and twos, spread well round the room. The experience was novel, and a duty very happily undertaken.

The professor, all unsuspecting, began, in his very first remarks, to attack the Church. Galileo again; and the failure to allow the really brainy type to use his reasoning ability. Then came a more subtle and, to the Catholics present, a new form of attack, namely, that the Christian philosophy based, as the speaker put it, on the reward for good deeds in this life, was based on selfish motives.

Really, it was quite pathetic. The Methodist minister spoke, and said nothing. His main idea was to offend no one. Then the debate was thrown open, and there could be no doubt among those present that there were Catholics among them, and that the Church had a very definite answer to scientific humanism. Galileo was put into proper perspective; the Piltdown skull was thrown in for good measure; and the whole Catholic basis for life, namely, that of doing good, not for sake of reward, but for the sole purpose of expressing our love for God, was put over. From a Catholic point of view, the meeting was a great success. No rough-housing; just the presentation of the truth; a daily job of work for the Catholic layman.

Then there was the meeting of the local Management Association, addressed by the National Director of the Industrial Christian Fellowship. Here again was an ideal opportunity to put the Catholic point of view before a non-Catholic audience, and to correct statements such as this one, that 'The Church was so busy attacking others as to neglect to show her members how the Christian ideal can be applied to modern industrial life'. People who might never have heard of *Rerum Novarum* then had their opportunity—and just another fragment of Catholic teaching was passed on.

## V

The evidence guild speaker is a man, or a woman, convinced of the appeal of the doctrines of the Church, and determined to grasp every conceivable opportunity to share with others the treasure which he has found. For this reason, the guildsman has made special efforts during recent years to address Catholic audiences, with a view to giving to other Catholic layfolk the benefit of experiences gained in contact and discussion with non-Catholics. Every Catholic, in the course of his daily life, is asked about his faith. Sometimes the questions are put courteously, sometimes not. The question may be difficult, it may be easy. But a question means an opportunity, and surely it is true that very, very few Catholics are capable of taking the opportunity when it comes. Here the C.E.G. speaker can make a tremendous contribution to the Catholic cause in this country. He has spent many years of his life in studying his faith, and has specialized in the question and answer technique; from experience he knows the type of question which will occur most often, and can indicate the approach in answering which has been found to be most successful.

The guildsman must train his fellow Catholic, and so, through others, extend his work.

For this reason, we have spent much time in speaking to other societies. For instance, to the Grail on vocation in work, coupled with the need for the young Catholic worker to be armed with a knowledge as well as a love for his faith; to the same society, a talk on Christian marriage from an experienced woman speaker.

Talks to the Knights of St Columba, with a view to marshalling Catholic men as daily apostles of the truth; to the C.Y.M.S.—indicating the outlook of non-Catholic groups, and the Catholic approach to difficulties with different types. Creating *interest* in studying the faith; showing indeed that the layman can and should play his part in bringing about the eventual conversion of England.

Talks to the Catholic Women's League, with the idea of helping women and mothers to answer questions on their faith from the adolescents in the home. Talks to the Newman Association, and to the Catenians, so that professional men, too, shall be reminded of the contribution which they also can be making.

And, supremely, talks and guild presentation and answers, in the new type of guild meeting, the parish forum. Here a great new field of activity has been revealed. The normal arrangement is for the guild to hire a parish hall, and, with the co-operation of the parish priest, to publicize the meeting. Catholic societies in the neighbourhood are circulated, an advertisement inserted in the press where possible, and non-Catholics are invited to come along with their Catholic friends.

Two or three very short talks are given, on widely varying topics; for instance, in one forum, the talks might be on marriage, on 'Why I am a Catholic', and the mass. Then questions on these subjects are invited, followed by questions on any other point of Catholic doctrine.

These meetings have proved to be immensely popular, with attendance varying from twenty or thirty to two hundred, according to the parish. Once Catholics have seen the question-and-answer technique in operation, they have proved to be more interested in doing something about learning the answer for themselves. For the very interested, attendance at the guild's indoor training sessions is encouraged; for the others, encouragement to read appropriate literature and to attend a subsequent forum is the usual approach.

Once the idea of studying the faith has registered, there is no limit to the subject-matter which can be put over. At a medieval disputation, run in conjunction with such a series, the attendance was in the order of ninety people. This, surely, is a tribute to the desire of Catholics to 'do something about it' once the lead is given; but even the lead is not sufficient, for very few Catholics are capable of lone study. They need help, and encouragement, and the benefit of group learning and discussion; this gives confidence, and hastens the useful application of the individual's contribution to society.

The evidence guild forum is a great parish weapon, and many priests have come to recognize its value.

## VI

Now we are back to our speaker again: the speaker in his private circle of friends. Strangely enough, many of his friends will be non-Catholics, for their company fascinates him. Rest assured that, wherever he may be, his guild work continues: not

in the sense that he rams Catholic teaching down everyone's throat, but that he is ready, quietly and confidently, always to give an account of the faith that is in him to those who ask.



## ST AUGUSTINE'S GEOGRAPHY OF CONVERSION

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

**I** SUPPOSE the thing that strikes one most forcibly about St Augustine's *Confessions* is the astonishing power of introspection which they reveal. Rarely can there have been a man aware of himself and his experience with such ruthless clarity. The result is that all Augustine's theological thought is an experience-theology. It is never abstract, uncommitted, or impersonal. But this is not to say that his mind remained enclosed in his own personal world. He was not only a person of unusual self-awareness, he was also, if we can so put it, an unusually public person. Because he could look at himself so shrewdly and objectively, he was able to develop his experience into ideas of universal validity. It is with such a development of his experience of conversion that we are here concerned; not with the personal voyage of discovery described in the *Confessions*, but with the geographical charts which came of that voyage, and which he unfolds in his *De Trinitate*.

First of all a word of explanation about why conversion should come into a book on the Trinity. The *De Trinitate* is not a scientific theological treatise on the mystery of the Trinity; it is a quest, an attempt to discover the three divine Persons almost as Columbus discovered America. In the first seven books Augustine investigates the *data* of scripture and tradition for the doctrine; in the last eight he sets out to discover the reality of the Trinity through the image of the Trinity which is man, man *secundum mentem*, in his highest or spiritual part. Simply as an intellectual exercise the effort is doomed to failure, and Augustine explains why in the last book. We may take it that he realized this before he began. It is only in the next life that we will be able to *see* the divine Persons, that faith will give way to the vision of perfect understanding. Before we can fully discover God, we must cross the Atlantic ocean of death. But the point is that for Augustine the effort to