

the Christian community cannot just express itself sacramentally in Church, so we must conclude that Christian concern for sickness cannot be expressed merely sacramentally in the anointing of the sick. Just as the mass should be the expression and the centre of a social solidarity in the parish, so the anointing of the sick should be culmination of the parishioners' concern for each other in sickness. It is true that a visit from certain parishioners, particularly the more 'active', may sometimes result in a relapse rather than a recovery on the part of a sensitive patient, but this is a comment on the situation in which we have allowed communal parish life to fall into the hands of the organisers and the committee-minded. The coming of the priest (and why only one?—St James does after all explicitly suggest that it should be a matter of them all, not just the man 'on sick calls') should be the final sacramental expression of the interest shown by the whole community in 'one among you who is sick'.

Preaching to Adults

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'Remember that your congregation consists of characters from *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*', said the film critic to a preacher. He was annoyed, as most of us would be. Beer-swilling adulterers like Arthur Seaton may well be present occasionally at mass, but they are not likely to be regular churchgoers; and even if they were, we cannot overlook the vast numbers of ordinary decent Catholics who only want as much to do with such types as charity strictly requires. And if we are reminded that there are also good people in this film, we can still say that they do not adequately represent the great variations which we can find in most large churches on Sunday. But the reminder does draw attention to an often neglected aspect of our preaching: the congregation.

The most conscientious priest will spend time and energy in studying and assembling the material for his sermon and then in presenting it simply. He knows that he cannot rely on a theological training on the

part of his congregation as a whole nor to all intents and purposes on the part of individuals. He must not say that an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity requires a firm grasp of the notion of procession or that an appreciation of the distinction between *ex opere operato* and *ex opere operantis* is vital to an intelligent reception of the sacraments. This is largely a question of terminology and most priests will aim at a deeper simplicity.

'Whosoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child', they will quote, thinking with joy of the monthly, weekly and daily communicants who resent high-flown orations and insist—without even knowing Thomas à Kempis—on their need of being pleasing to the Trinity rather than disputing learnedly about it. They may also be feeling slightly irritated by those who think that the priest's title of 'Father' gives him no right to talk to them as if they were really children. This irritation is not unnatural, especially when—as so often in this country—criticism comes as a kind of explosion after over-long submission to the priest's authority as if it were that of the pope himself and hedged about with the privilege of infallibility. But the objection also is not unnatural.

Our sermons and instructions, except at a mass intended particularly for the children, must be addressed to adults. We have to take account of variety in the congregation, but there is a limit: provision must be made for children's instruction, but at most or all of the Sunday masses we are concerned with the over-fifteens and largely with much older persons with adult responsibilities and experience—an experience which may be deeper than our own.

Experience of life there well may be, but we must not expect even among the devout that acceptance of the importance of the supernatural which comes easily to a priest who merely observes to the letter the rules of clerical life. He has his daily mass and office, spiritual reading, his ministry, his additional week-end duties—all concerned directly with worship of God and the establishment of his kingdom on earth. The layman spends most of his time in a wholly secular atmosphere, often faced with discomforts and hardships from which we are carelessly protected; women living at home may be free from some of these burdens, but they have others: the care of the household, bringing up children, loneliness and often the strain of making a living for the spinster and the widow. For both men and women Sunday mass will only be a part of the week-end relief from some of the week-day burdens. A few will look forward to it as the greatest event of the week and will come

eagerly to worship and to hear the word of God, perhaps also come to an evening service; but we are deluding ourselves if we think that the majority regard it as much more than a simple duty, sometimes pleasant but almost always involving some inconvenience. The cares of the week will intrude on their thoughts and cause distraction; more often there will be anxiety about distracted children, present with them or left in the care of the other parent—a Catholic who also has to get out to mass or a non-Catholic who cannot really appreciate the need of a strict obligation in this matter. Television and radio have also had an effect on the most willing listener. Not many of us have the approach of an Archbishop Heenan or even the technique of some of the more capable clergymen who try to lift up our hearts in the early morning. If we are too dull, too complex or—quite simply—too long, some of our congregation will be uneasy about their charges in church or at home and many will simply switch off—accustomed as they are to background music while they get on with their every-day occupations.

These are perhaps superficial difficulties, but they must affect our style and our timing. We must not rush through the mass to satisfy the impatient, we cannot neglect the duty of enlightening and uplifting them; but unless our instruction is brief enough for a morning low mass not to be protracted much beyond three quarters of an hour, it will fall on very many deaf ears.

More important is the outlook, based on experience, of these adolescents, grown-up men and women, the middle-aged and the ageing. They will take a great deal from us, not even think of protesting, but will simply not assimilate what is patently remote from life as they know it. We cannot, for instance, effectively condemn birth-control unless at the same time we show that we are aware of the heroism required of married people who respond in this respect to the demands of natural law and supernatural grace. The same heroism may well be required to observe in our present-day world many another law which we glibly justify by arguments from reason. The maintenance of the affluent society is often as cruel in its effects as the struggle for existence in the midst of starvation. We only need to recall familiar theses on the necessity of revelation to appreciate the fact that natural truths obvious in themselves have never been obvious to the greatest and most enlightened thinkers in history. And we know from theology that observance of the natural law cannot go very far without the aid of grace. It is in this 'natural' world that our people have to live and find their way to heaven. No point in our emphasizing the fact: they know that world

far better than we can ever expect to do. Our task is less to lay down the law than to draw their attention to the wonder of grace and the grandeur of their vocation.

Doctrine must then be presented simply indeed, not in the form we assimilated it in the seminary—not merely because this would be difficult, but because it was grasped largely as remote from real life—but also not again in the form in which they received it in school. The catechism may be used to stir the memory, but merely as a starting-point for an altogether grander presentation. To go back to the two examples mentioned earlier in this article: we shall preach the Trinity and bring out the importance of the processions, but without using the name, and we shall remember that parents in our congregation are properly so named because their function is analogous to and therefore truly resembling, however remotely, the divine fatherhood; we shall show that the sacraments have their effect independently of the merits of the priest, because they are the gestures of Christ himself pressing his grace upon us and only impeded by downright ill-will. When we first learned about the sacraments, we were little aware of our capacity for evil, for determined resistance to the love of Christ; and for a long time after we had been accustomed to say 'Our Father' and even to know Mary's son as the Son of God, we had no conception of the capacity for generous self-giving on the part even of a merely human paternal or filial love. We must give our congregations credit for knowing these things: whether ill or well educated, they are adults and they have had experience of life.

This still does not mean that we are to be continually seeking examples in real life, to press analogy beyond the limits it will bear. Tone and accent can convey our sympathy and understanding and make clear abstruse doctrines as well as words. This will be achieved to the extent that, on the one hand, doctrine is presented in terms of the person of Christ—with whom revelation reaches its climax and most perfect expression—and, on the other, we know in their individual and family lives the members of the congregation facing us.

The parish priest and curates who have been resident for a number of years have special advantages here. They may not hear much criticism of their sermons, still less well-founded praise, but they ought to have discovered the general level of education and know what spiritual resources can be tapped to bring the devout up to a higher standard of sanctity and draw the worldly towards a deeper understanding and a more ready acceptance of the burdens of the faith. They should know

the particular circumstances of different families and individuals and make allowance for these while presenting a message enlightening and encouraging to all. They can also make their sermons and instructions formative influences on the life of the parish as a whole. A group is something more than the sum-total of the individuals who compose it and the preacher can take advantage of this fact both to make his message more convincing and to cement the bonds of charity in the parish, particularly if he links it with the mass and communion.

To these last themes we must return again and again. The liturgy as it presents the mysteries of Christ throughout the Church's year must be our main source of sermon material, but that is only to say that our Lord must be presented as a real person, living now and risen, but bringing the redemption to effect in our midst; it means also that we are drawing on the scriptures for our picture of him and therefore on the devout scholarship which has both brought out the meaning of the text and developed the theology of the incarnate Word. Precisely in order to gain a real—as opposed to a notional—and living assent to these truths, to rouse a deeper faith and a mature love, we ourselves must study as well as pray and give to our people the ripe fruits of our study.

More—much more—needs to be said of the humanity of Christ. We do not need to trouble the congregation with reasons why this humanity did not constitute a distinct person, with the diverse modes of knowledge in the soul of Christ or with the reconciliation of his impeccability with his human freedom. But we do need to reflect again on these things and then, confident in our grasp of the underlying principles, speak boldly of a life perfect as human and perfect in its glad submission to divine grace. However mysterious it may be that a divine person, with a human soul enjoying the beatific vision, grew in knowledge, it is a fact. And when it is related to a progressive awareness of his mission on earth, it is most illuminating and encouraging to growing men and women seeking to know what God wants of them. If he was without sin and without that temptation which takes us by surprise, arising from passion, he was still tempted: the gospel of the first Sunday in Lent is not given us merely as an example, but it *is* that and it needs to be explained in terms of the depth of human suffering which it caused. It can be used constantly outside Lent to explain the necessity of re-making with a mature faith and awareness of our solitude in this world the choice made for us at our baptism. And the fact that, with his human mind made up, his human will resolute to the end, confirmed and perfected in grace, he could still pray is evidence not only of our duty of prayer but also of the need

constantly to renew that decision of faith. The mystery remains, but adult experience of life—with or without advanced education—assures the preacher of a response.

We can insist on the cruelty of our Lord's death without having to make comparisons with other ways of dying. Possibly some of our congregation have witnessed worse things than a crucifixion, nearly all have come into contact with death in some form and know it to be always a cruel and a severe test to the faith of anyone who has reached beyond childhood dreams of heaven. On the other hand, the longing for survival of the whole man—without regard to philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul—is sufficiently strong to prepare the mind for belief in the resurrection. Again this must be presented, not merely as an argument in apologetics, still less as something constructed out of shattered beliefs, but precisely as a fact which shattered the disciples' complacency and despair, another call to leave all things and abandon their accustomed ways, another challenge to their love. Hard to believe, impossible without grace, but still the only thing which will satisfy the age-old longing of mankind. In presenting the fact of Easter as historical truth, why should we not appeal to the experience of the race, even to folk-memories more vivid in the young but more surely determining attitudes and rousing hopes in the old:

Ganz vergessener Völker Müdigkeiten

Kann ich nicht abtun von meinen Lidern.

In a word, we are addressing adults and appealing to a common experience. In a very young priest the congregation will forgive and even be impressed by a certain innocence, but those of us who are over thirty will make no impression unless we combine innocence with experience. The best among our audience are a little cynical, they have lost many illusions but they only ask of us some understanding of the world as it is and a hint as to how they can realise the truth that we preach. Again, we do not need to experience all the burdens of the world to preach effectively; we do need to know the Christ of the Gospels,

Our Healer's body, bloodless clay

Stretched on the gallows

the bliss

When the Son came victorious in his power

With all good souls, into God's domain.

If we cannot produce poetry like the author of the *Dream of the Road*, we must at least share the experience which gave rise to it. That will suffice to convince our adults that the message counts.

We must also have in mind particular groups or individuals among these adult listeners. We may well hold them by the very fact of taking them into our confidence, of recognizing their adult status. But a little more effort—expressed in an occasional remark or merely in the tone of voice—may bear much more fruit.

We shall not offend the illiterate if we carefully choose our words for the educated. But in fact there are almost no illiterates today and there are a great many who are better educated than ourselves. They have not perhaps studied philosophy or theology, but if they have gained an honours degree they have certainly studied their own subject at a deeper level than the average seminarist studies theology. The pass degree people, the technicians, the business men and even some of the general practitioners have infuriatingly one-track minds, but they rightly expect of us not dictatorial statements, but the guidance which comes from a more specialized study and greater leisure to develop it. We have long been accustomed to talk in this way to doctors, considering them as equals professionally and possessed of a specialized knowledge on account of which they deserved to be addressed with respect; nor were we offended if, while acknowledging the supernatural dignity of the priesthood, they spoke to us as colleagues—concerned with their own problems from a different aspect. Today specialists of one kind or another are sufficiently prominent in the congregation to demand our addressing them with the same kind of respect. That applies not only to solicitors, teachers, business men—the stalwarts of Catenian associations—but to the endless variety of technicians required for the functioning of modern society.

The specialists and technicians are particularly noticeable among the young, the contemporaries of Arthur Seaton, and the same bent of mind is already evident among teen-agers. To hold their attention is the most difficult of all, but if we can gain it—by solid argument, not by superficial appeals—we can be sure that the rest of the congregation is with us.

This is not the place to discuss the causes of lapsing among the young, whether Catholic schools or parents are to blame. The best school cannot anticipate the religious problems of a highly personal character which arise for its pupils only after they have left it. Good Catholic parents, exceptionally gifted with understanding and sympathy, may still seem remote to a disturbed adolescent. As priests and as elders, we also are remote. But perhaps just because we do not seem to be getting at him, the younger person may be more open to our message than to parental advice.

Undoubtedly, we have to confirm the lesson he is now learning that the world is a hard place and loyalty to the faith may demand greater hardship. But we cannot leave it at that. We must recognize also his adult status and offer him the faith in terms intelligible to someone who has gone beyond his school-books, show him supernature as exalting and not suppressing all those natural instincts which are now so urgently seeking expression. We shall do this more effectively if our teaching is directed at the congregation as a whole; the younger members must be made to feel that they have discovered for themselves the relevance of the preacher's message to their personal problems.

There are other classes for whom provision must be made in the manner if not in the matter of our sermons. It is unpardonable to address women as the inferior sex, but we do not need to make heroic efforts to understand the female mind; for the most part it is sufficient to remember that they also are adults, with experiences and responsibilities in the natural order which the most heroic priest is glad to be spared. Nor will it do to assume that the old are satisfied with the familiar commonplaces: they too want to be reminded of the adventure of faith and the freshness of the grace of Christ in their unageing souls.

This is a hard task. It might be easier if certain improvements were introduced into Catholic schools, if projected reforms in the liturgy were already here. There is a place for discussing all these problems. But when we go into the pulpit, we have to take our congregation as it is and use that occasion as if it were all we had for making them into saints and promoting the kingdom of God on earth.