

## THE TERRITORIES OF GRACE

### The Parish and The Modern World

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**R**ELIGIOUS sociology, as an academic study in its own right, is scarcely twenty years old, and as yet its true dimensions have hardly been realized. Indeed Professor Gabriel Le Bras, its virtual founder, can speak with pardonable rhetoric of its 'limitless horizons', since it 'embraces all times, all countries, all man's dreams of time and the infinite'. Of course there is a sense in which the material which the religious sociologist considers has always been there. The Church exists among men, in time and place, and even the old testament provides ample evidence of the close connection between men's worship of God and the social setting in which it is to be achieved.

The structure of the Church's organized life is a palimpsest of her history. To that extent it is a matter of chance, or perhaps one should say of the providence that ordained her growth in terms of particular cultures and societies. Thus it is that the venerable pattern of diocese, deanery and parish reflects the evolution of the Church through centuries of European history, and the provisions of the canon law themselves are the testimony to a past which, at many points, bears small resemblance to the circumstances of the urbanized and industrialized world in which her mission is principally exercised today. This is not to say that the Church can only flourish within an ideal society, which, by implication, is usually thought of as pastoral, free from the anonymous wickedness of the city. As a matter of history the Church grew up in the cities of the Mediterranean world, and the idyllic legend of the happy conformity of medieval rural Europe now seems to be insecurely founded. Yet it remains true that many of the assumptions of the Church's external structure find little echo in a society that is secularized, not simply because it is urban but, more profoundly, because it has lost the sense of a community that *needs* to be baptized.

This sense of the heavenly Jerusalem, of which the Church on earth (and hence the parish which is its local realization) is a

foreshadowing, at once affirms a meaning and a measure. A meaning: because here we live by faith, and its mysteries are a pledge of a glory that can only be hereafter. A measure: because all things are under the hand of God and must be referred to him. One has only to consider the liturgy of a church's consecration to see this truth proclaimed. It is at a double level: of future glory, certainly, of which the mass is the supreme expression; but of present sanctification no less, so that all man's capacities to make and move and sing are here and now engaged and engraced. Thus a sacred art is a subordination of the creative skills of painter, carver, musician, weaver, dancer to the central stone of the altar, which, in its turn, is subordinated to the heavenly vision, apocalyptic and eternal.

The human society, then, is always looking to a culmination that lies beyond its limits of joy or achievement. That is not to say that the Church cares little for men as they are, and sees them only as travellers whose destination matters so much more than their journey. But it does mean that there can never be a wholly perfect environment for the life of grace: its territories can never be circumscribed by rule or climate, system or caste. Yet it must be hoped that even on earth, whether in Morbihan or Manchester, the society of men should itself be the local habitation of a life of grace that engraces *all*—not a part, now and again, when time and place are met in a favourable conjunction. The parish should be the community of the people of God, who acknowledge their need and find in the house of God a home.

In terms of social structures such a hope must mean above all else the possibility of freedom, so that the demands of economic pressure or of political obligation do not destroy the primary purpose of the Christian community, which is to give honour and glory to God. The Church exists to animate communities that are organically human. Her sacraments are not occasional interventions, having no point of reference in the usual life of the people they are intended to sanctify. Her worship is meant to engage all that is naturally implicit in the life of a healthy society.

The work of the religious sociologist is to consider—if one may use the terminology of the scholastics in this context—the *material* causality of the Church's mission: not its final or formal cause, which owes nothing to change or circumstance. But the material

cause, in the sense of the Church's situation in a particular historical context, even though it is not determinant, is none the less vitally important. For the Church is not an abstraction. Certainly her final glory lies hereafter, but her work on earth is subject to the influences that affect any organization that exists among men. And it is very evident that the effectiveness of the Church's mission depends on a realistic understanding of factors that in themselves may seem to have no special religious significance. To deny their importance is to 'spiritualize' the Church to the point of denying her concern with the incarnational fact of her origin. There is a Jerusalem that is above, to which all the Church's life is tending. But there is a city below which she is to sanctify, and no part of that city's life can be alien to her mission.

Two recent French books<sup>1</sup> provide good examples of the scope and method of a religious sociology. They describe very clearly the radical problem of the Church's impact on an urbanized society, in which many of her traditional sanctions have ceased to count. And judgement is not in terms of generalized conclusions: accurate and intelligently organized statistics give an idea of the dimensions of the problem. The picture is specifically a French one, though much information is given of other countries besides. M. Winninger's book is particularly informative about Holland, Switzerland, Italy, and America, though England is scarcely mentioned, and the admirable work of the Newman Demographic Survey seems to be unknown to either author. From the mass of material a consistent design emerges: it is that the traditional structure of the parish has largely ceased to meet the contemporary needs of the Church in large towns. Parishes are too huge and too impersonal. The canon law envisages that the parish priest should know his flock (*suas oves cognoscere*), and this is plainly not possible when perhaps ten or twenty thousand Catholics are committed to his care. (If his responsibilities extend to all, whether Catholic or not, then in a country such as England the problem is graver still.)

The mere size of urban parishes is not of course the only reason for the grievous decline of the Church's influence on the life of the community it exists to serve. There are many complex factors

<sup>1</sup> *La Ville et l'Eglise*. Premier Bilan des Enquêtes de Sociologie Religieuse Urbaine. Par Jean Chélini. (Rencontres, No. 52: Paris, Editions du Cerf.)

*Construire des Eglises*. Les Dimensions des Paroisses et les Contradictions de l'Apostolat dans les Villes. Par Paul Winninger. (Rencontres, No. 49: Paris, Editions du Cerf.)

—conditions of labour, social habits, use of leisure, new patterns of housing—which in combination have destroyed the compact and evenly ordered life of a traditional parish. The reluctance to modify the inherited shape of parochial life in view of the wholly changed circumstances created by an industrialized society, with all its accompaniments of ease of transport, mobility of labour, and the radical change in family life, is perhaps due to a psychology of suspicion. There is little in the picture of any large industrial town to suggest the intimate relationship of pastor and flock, and much of the Church's mission seems a nostalgic appeal to return to a way of living which inevitably has ceased to be.

The very size of the parish is the symptom of the difficulty. One thinks of the gaunt Gothic barns that sprang up in the wake of the industrial growth of Victorian England: huge churches which are about as welcoming as a railway terminus, and about as restful on a Sunday morning, with their ceaseless coming and going, filling and emptying of congregations who, for the most part must remain personally unknown to the parish priest. As M. Winninger points out, a fifth curate may lighten the burden of the existing four but this does not noticeably extend the circle of parishioners who are known and reached. 'Six priests entrusted with the care of ten thousand souls reach far fewer people than two groups of three priests, when each group has only five thousand souls to see to.' A true community is only possible within manageable dimensions, and the parish is meant to be a community—which is to say a body of people with a common life and a shared responsibility.

The multiplication of churches, or even of chapels-of-ease, is not merely a matter of convenience for the faithful: it is the indispensable condition for the rebuilding of parish life in the circumstances of today. It is argued of course that this is too costly, that there are other charges—notably schools—on whatever money may be available. But the assumption is too often that a church must be a Gothically permanent building, whereas with modern methods of construction it is possible to build much more economically, and indeed to combine the church or chapel with other buildings. Is it beyond the wit of an architect to make provision for a chapel in a vast block of flats, for instance? And should it not be axiomatic that any new Catholic school must include a chapel, which, apart from its essential function in the

life of the school itself, could on Sundays bring together the families who send their children to the school? This is especially necessary when many new schools are inter-parochial and have no close link (of geography or of allegiance) with any particular parish.

Among the gravest problems that the parish is confronted with is that of vast numbers of uprooted people—in this country especially the Irish—for whom the anarchy of industrialized city life is wholly strange. Brought up in the strict traditions of rural Catholicism, in which the obligations or religion are as inescapable as the rising and setting of the sun, they suddenly find themselves at the mercy of a society which cares not at all for these values. And in any case the church they find bears very little resemblance in many respects to the one they have left: they are strangers, and nobody knows or seems to care whether they come or go. And often they go. They have not so much left the Church as failed to find her. Professor Le Bras, in his preface to M. Chélini's book, speaks thus of the Bretons (who are in this respect so like the Irish). 'Montparnasse station [we might substitute Euston] marks for many Bretons (even Children of Mary) the threshold of religious slackness, and for the majority the threshold of an indifference which is expressed in neglect of mass and Easter duties. In other words the roots of practice reach down to custom and not to conscience, and gregarious habits have concealed the want of all personal religion. The city, freeing the individual from the social link of his origins, dispenses him from giving honour to a God who was the God of his community.'

The enquiries of the religious sociologist are not an answer to such a problem as this. But, to use Professor Le Bras' phrase, it is possible to build up a 'psychological biography' of the family, to discover what in fact are the determinant factors in the loss of practice and of faith itself. Such enquiries will surely lead to conclusions about the weakness of 'gregarious' religious practice and the need for personal formation and preparation for adult Catholic life; they will discover the dangers of emigration, and the need for preserving links with the country of origin as well as for finding ways of integrating the outsider into the rhythm of parochial life.

Ideally, the parish is the meeting-place of the people of God. Here the Christian community finds its meaning: work and leisure

alike need the point of reference and of rest which the mass supremely provides. For it is the mass which makes the many one. In the familiar words of the *Didache*, 'as this broken bread was scattered over the hills and then, when gathered, became one mass, so may the Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into thy Kingdom'.<sup>2</sup> And, however secularized the usual setting of men's work may have become, however acute may be the contrast between the atomized world without and the world within the church's walls, the perennial meaning of the mass remains as the gathering together of the people of God, making them the community of Christ. It is possible indeed to do much to break down the impersonal hugeness of urban Catholic life—the example of P. Loew, O.P., at Marseilles is one among many—and the sociologist can do a great deal to indicate, in material terms, where things have gone wrong and how they may be mended. But in the meantime, and immediately, more must be done to redeem the time, however unfavourable the setting and circumstances may seem. Here one must salute the providential importance of the recent instruction on participation in the mass, and wonder a little at the pusillanimity which, in some quarters, has sought to minimize its bold appeal.

For it is only through the recovery of the sense of the mass as a communal *action* that the chronic debility of parish life can be combated. Psychologically, the effect of participation—active and aware—in the common prayer of the Church is itself an answer to the passive and anonymous attitude that is so general towards work and leisure alike. And it would be foolish to think, for instance, of televised masses as anything but an introduction to a work that is to be *done*. A merely verbal share in the offering of the mass is obviously not enough, but even that can be a beginning: the word uttered is itself the figure of the total involvement of the baptized member of the Body of Christ in the sacrifice which he, in union with the priest, offers day by day. It is in the mass—so perfect a realization as it is of the use of all created things in their service of God—that all man's making finds its ultimate context. The thing is good in itself—whether it be stone or fabric, sound or gesture—and its goodness is respected and safeguarded in the use to which it is put in the worship of God. Perhaps it is through a recovery of what the offertory at mass

<sup>2</sup> *Didache*; 9, 4.

really means that we shall begin to turn back the tide of the secular and impersonal world which has invaded the parish and has made it sometimes seem too old and useless ever to be new again.



## MANAGEMENT AND LIFE TODAY

### A Christian Approach

BY A BUSINESS CONSULTANT

*If American businessmen are right in the way most of them live now, then all the wise of the ages, the prophets and the saints were fools. If the saints were not fools, then the businessmen must be.*

**S**UCH is the stern, uncompromising beginning of a leading article in *Fortune*<sup>1</sup> when the Chancellor of the Jewish Seminary writes on 'The American Businessman's Moral Failure'. He realizes that, in an industrial society especially, the manager bears tremendous responsibility: his customs, morals and attitudes pervade the whole life of the country. The tragedy, as this article stresses, is that most managers have lost sight of the moral sources of economic strength and that no country can reach the height of economic success achieved by Britain or the United States without a philosophy and a faith more concerned with the human spirit than the comfort of the body.

Nearly two years ago, the British Institute of Management programmed for official discussion: 'Are we failing to stress sufficiently in our selection and development of management the spiritual aspects?' and within the last two months Belgian employers have discussed—for the first time—'Evangelical Poverty and the Christian Employer'. It raised such important problems that now three days are to be devoted to considering: 'Spirituality and the Employer—His Apostolate in Management'.

Yes, the world of management needs badly Christian guidance and missionaries!

<sup>1</sup> September 1958.